

MYTHIC WOMEN REBORN:
DJEBAR'S SCHEHERAZADE & ATWOOD'S PENELOPE

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how two modern female writers approach the retelling of stories involving mythic heroines. Assia Djébar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* repurposes *Arabian Nights* to reclaim a sisterly solidarity rooted in a pre-colonial Algerian female identity rather than merely colonized liberation. In approaching the oppressive *harem* through the lens of the bond between Scheherazade and her sister Dinarzade, Djébar allows women to transcend superficial competition and find true freedom in each other. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* interrogates the idealized wife Penelope from Homer's *Odyssey* in order to highlight its heroine's complicity in male violence against women. Elevating the disloyal maids whom Odysseus murders, Atwood questions the limitations of sisterhood and the need to provide visibility, voice, and justice for the forgotten victims powerful men have dismissed and destroyed. The two novels signal a shift in feminist philosophy from the need for collective action to the need to recognize individual narratives. Both texts successfully re-appropriate the dominant myths they retell to propose a more nuanced and complicated view of what it means to be "Woman."

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s, Assia Djebar begins constructing a quartet of books concerning the female experience in Algeria. The second of these volumes, *Ombre sultana* (1987) (trans. *A Sister to Scheherazade* (1993))¹, confronts the myth of Scheherazade from *One Thousand and One Nights* (circa 1400)² and how this collection of traditional stories helps to define the modern Algerian experience for women. Djebar's focus on the sisterhood between Scheherazade and Dinarzade allows her to call women to solidarity in the face of oppressive patriarchy. Nearly twenty years later and a continent away, Margaret Atwood agrees to contribute to *The Myths* series, which "brings together some of the world's finest writers, each of whom has retold a myth in a contemporary and memorable way" (Atwood, iv). Atwood chooses to deconstruct Homer's *Odyssey* (circa 800 BC)³ and attempts to unravel the carefully woven tale of the ideal wife: Penelope. In *The Penelopiad* (2005), Atwood transforms her heroine from a model of female virtue into a problematic male ally in order to comment on the forgotten female victims who haunt great men.

Both overtly feminist novels, *Sister to Scheherazade* and *The Penelopiad* reflect the progression from the cautious optimism of shared sisterly solidarity into the comparatively

¹ Throughout the thesis I will refer to the text by its translated title *A Sister to Scheherazade*.

² Stories for *One Thousand and One Nights* were compiled in various forms between the 9th and 14th centuries, drawing on oral traditions. "The principle tales" were written down by the end of the 13th century (al-Musawi, v). In 1704, Antoine Galland's French translation brought the tales to Europe as *Les mille et une nuits* (al-Musawi, v). In Assia Djebar's retelling, the author reacts to the tales as both a representation of cultural ownership but also colonial appropriation: they are and are not Algerian and are and are not French. To highlight this complexity and tension, I have chosen to refer to the tales by their English title *Arabian Nights* throughout this thesis.

³ Oral histories and tales predate *The Odyssey* in its written form. W.H.D Rouse contends in his introduction to his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* that the exact date of Homer's entry is unknown but most scholars date it towards the end of the 7th century (Rouse, xix).

pessimistic exhaustion expressed by those sisters denied voice or witness. In structuring this thesis I have chosen to privilege Djébar and Atwood's texts to highlight this shift in feminist philosophy rather than following the chronological order of the source texts, which would place *The Odyssey* before *Arabian Nights*. When comparing the two sources, I will revert to chronological order for better context. The changing perspective from Djébar to Atwood represents a wider redefinition of the feminist movement to tackle what Verta Taylor identifies as its central existential "paradox": "Building the group consciousness and solidarity that is necessary for women to rise up and resist their own oppression tends to reify the very gender differences that feminism seeks to obliterate...by emphasizing the unity and the common experiences of women, the feminist movement unwittingly under-mines the diversity of—and...even limits the freedom of—individual women" (280). Djébar's text seeks to unite women against systematic oppression to start a movement together, a position that makes sense given her less permissive cultural context. It is also a position that falls in line with the broader conversation within the feminist movement during the 1980s when "words like 'sisterhood' had a certain currency" (Rivkin and Ryan, 766). Atwood's text reveals the limitations and dangers of this approach for those women who are removed from the narrative, a common thread for feminists in the early 2000s when the movement was more interested in recognizing individual narratives over collective identity (Rivkin and Ryan, 768).

I have chosen to examine these two particular feminist retellings of myth in order to focus on a specific type of mythic female heroine trapped in a specific type of story. While *The Odyssey* and *Arabian Nights* come out of different cultures, they have a great deal in common, especially in terms of the portrayals of their key female characters.

Homer's *Odyssey* details a world where the gods walk among men and often influence their actions. Nymphs, sirens, and journeys to the land of the dead are all commonplace rather than fantastical, or, as D.S. Carne-Ross puts it, "the mythical or folktale structure is dominant" (xii). The Grecian society Homer crafts places a high premium on feats of honor and glory appropriate to its mythic stature. Pursuing legacy both through personal deeds and through the continuation of bloodlines is paramount (Steiner, xvii). Men and women perform complementary but separate functions in Homer. Eva Cantarella notes that women in Grecian antiquity are the keepers of the home and the domestic sphere, while men pursue matters of the *polis* (46). As the objects over which men compete, women allow their male counterparts to achieve recognition. The women connected to male heroes through romantic, sexual, or familial ties either help to upkeep their men's reputations or, through their improper actions, can destroy those reputations. Despite the fact that their expected roles are, in some ways, more limited than those of "modern" women, Homer's female characters are granted a great deal of power and agency within those roles. As Carne-Ross discusses, the necessity and importance of femininity as a source of civility and stability is strongly emphasized, particularly in *The Odyssey* (x-xi). The choices women make have drastic consequences for male characters and those choices often dictate the plot of the stories in which they appear.

Perhaps because of the desire to protect one's house and hence one's legacy after death, the sexual loyalty of mortal women, particularly wives, becomes the locus of much masculine concern in Homer's depiction of Grecian society. The same level of sexual scrutiny does not apply to male characters (or to female immortals), however, who are expected to have multiple partners, even as their houses are continued only through their legal spouse.

Arabian Nights roots itself less in myth and more in wonder than *The Odyssey*, providing space for djinnis and magic but not for the machinations of gods. The tales vary in their degree of realism, and sometimes, “the natural and the supernatural fuse” (al-Musawi, xvii). The fantastic, however, is always seen as fantastic rather than presented as ordinary. While many of the tales originate outside of Islamic culture (including the framing story of Scheherazade), “most are Islamic or Islamicized” and import the norms and codes of their religious context (al-Musawi, xvi). In *Arabian Nights*, the culture dictates the ultimate pursuit not so much as glory and legacy but rather as personal happiness often symbolized through riches, power, and spiritual well-being. Feats of daring are replaced with the capacity for clever trickery and rhetorical-astuteness (both values Homer prizes but sees as means to ends rather than ends in of themselves). Being able to fool the powerful, while it carries great risk, also provides high rewards if successful. The talented storytellers are almost always the winners in *Arabian Nights*.

In this social structure, women are both a symbol of men’s wealth and also a potential wellspring for emotional fulfillment. Men are permitted and expected to have multiple wives and mistresses—particularly if they are wealthy or royal. Female sexual fidelity is highly prized, and the social structure of the harem attempts to control access to female bodies through literally locking them away from everyone except their husbands and male relatives. Unlike Homer’s Grecian society, class differences are much more visible in *Arabian Nights*, and the tales comment explicitly on how assigned gender scripts change depending on class. Hence, a noble woman has authority over a lower-class man in a way she would not over another noble man. These differences are present in Homer’s Greece, but not explored. In *Arabian Nights*, class somewhat trumps gender.

Despite these differences, however, both tales overlap in many of their concerns. Both are principally invested in male-female relationships, especially male-female sexual relationships; both contain female-initiated betrayals of husbands; and both end with a woman convincing her husband of her loyalty and the worth of Woman at large. It is also significant that Penelope and Scheherazade are lionized in their respective myths. They are successful characters who are held up as heroines. They achieve exactly what they set out to achieve, and their desires are deemed correct within their social constructs. Penelope fends off suitors, keeps her son safe, and her husband returns to her. Scheherazade manages to escape the fate of her predecessors through 1,001 nights, convinces the sultan to reexamine his views on women, and the sultan grants her the position of sultana.

The success of both women within their narratives is predicated on their acceptance of and adherence to the male-dominated societies they inhabit. Penelope and Scheherazade are in positions of cultural privilege and their choices, while heroic, never exit the allowed boundaries of the patriarchy. Both women use their positions of comparative influence to effect positive change for women within the restrictions of their social systems. Scheherazade persuades the sultan to treat women as capable of fidelity and worthy of respect. Penelope uses her cunning to avoid being forced into a marriage she does not want and proves women can be loyal. Because both heroines follow the rules prescribed to them, however, they do not manage to significantly change those rules.

In *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf confronts this very contradiction. Because power necessarily comes from access to the structures of power, only accepted insiders can directly influence the structure itself. Insiders only retain their status if they remain on the inside, however, and attempting to question the source of their privilege is an efficient way to lose their

access to it. Hence outsiders, who arguably can better see systemic problems, are powerless and often punished or removed from society. Those who are most motivated to change the system do not have the influence to do so, and those who the system rewards can only modify their cultural context within the boundaries that context permits (320-323). Penelope and Scheherazade can be successful because they perfectly embody what the men around them demand a woman can and should be. To retell these tales successfully, Djebbar and Atwood must contend with what the limited success of their heroines means for a modern audience. Djebbar confronts this difficulty through moving her heroine from successful insider to rebellious outsider. Atwood, meanwhile, will interrogate the cost and worth of Penelope's achievements and how much of her renown springs from the desire of men to maintain their privileges over women.

The compulsion for modern writers to retell ancient myths is not new, nor is it unique to any one culture or tradition. To re-frame a myth is to recontextualize not only the dominant story, but how the world has chosen to interpret that tale. Roland Barthes suggests that "the principle of myth... transforms history into nature" (128). The stories we craft define culture, and myth clarifies what we deem true. Myths help to define the norms for the community which creates them. Barthes suggests that every societal revolt therefore requires the "murder of Literature as signification" (134). To rebel against systemic oppression is to confront and rewrite the myths which support the schemas of thought propping up that oppression. For Barthes, this rebellion is fraught with complications, as myth is adaptable and generally will use resistance to further its status as truth: "It thus appears that it is extremely difficult to vanquish myth from the inside: for the very effort one makes in order to escape its stranglehold becomes in its turn the prey of myth: myth can always, as a last resort, signify the resistance which is brought to bear against it" (134). Barthes points to the same difficulty as Woolf. Recognizing the categories by

which we judge the world and questioning them often results not in the abolition of the myth itself, but rather the destruction of the questioner. Barthes goes further than Woolf, however, to suggest that rebellion is necessary to support a myth. When someone abandons the script handed to her, she becomes a tool of that script to better identify those worthy of praise or punishment.

Reconstructing myth from new perspectives is a useful way around Barthes's trap insofar as it moves the resistance from the actions of individuals to competing narratives. To acknowledge that more than one version of a myth exists is to diminish the authority of any one tale to set cultural standards. While retellings still arguably inhabit the position of alternatives to the dominant narratives—and hence can reinforce that narrative per Barthes's claim—the most successful modify the source stories while also standing independent from them. They identify the foundational assumptions of the myth they challenge and reframe the story to question those assumptions directly. The potential of recontextualizing a myth is particularly compelling for writers concerned with presentations of “women” created to uphold strict patriarchal ideals. Hence, the retelling of tales about mythic women written largely by and for men is an alluring prospect for contemporary female writers. The act of retelling myth allows authors to confront how women are treated in prominent stories of the past and how the myth of Woman was crafted within their cultural frameworks.

Both Assia Djebar and Margaret Atwood confront the implications of two mythic stories on how we frame ideal femininity in the modern era. To fully appreciate their work requires reading the retold myths against their dominant stories to determine what contemporary writers have kept, changed, or eradicated. Their choices illuminate what is positioned as “natural” and “true” in the source myth as well as in the retelling.

While *The Odyssey* and *Arabian Nights* are primarily concerned with healing male-female relationships, Djebbar and Atwood move the narratives to tackle relationships between women. The modern texts allow for more agency and negotiation between women, and, in doing so, they elevate forgotten or demonized female characters. For Djebbar this consists of a move to include and focus on Scheherazade's sister, Dinarzade, the woman who sleeps beneath her bed and reminds her night after night to continue her stories. For Atwood, the narrative shifts to focus on Penelope's twelve disloyal maids who her son Telemachus murders. She also brings the infamous Helen of Troy front and center as Penelope's cousin and rival. These priorities force the contemporary texts to problematize the heroism of the central female leads. In the retold myths, the two heroines are haunted implicitly or explicitly by other female characters that serve as their foils and competitors. For Djebbar and Atwood, Scheherazade and Penelope achieve their successes at the expense of others. Scheherazade must contend with the deaths of the virgin brides and with the previous sultana's death and dishonor. Penelope must contend with the deaths of her disloyal maids and with Helen's dishonor.

My first chapter examines how Assia Djebbar's *A Sister to Scheherazade* attempts to unite the various women of *Arabian Nights* in an allied sisterhood through reconnecting with lost cultural heritage in colonized Algeria. Djebbar reinscribes the Scheherazade-Dinarzade dynamic on to her characters Isma and Hajila, who both are married to the same man at different times. I will argue that Djebbar uses the myth of Scheherazade to recognize the various forms of enslavement women can face in modern Algeria. She proposes that the supposed liberation of French culture Isma experiences has limitations and serves to make women subordinate to their own sexual desires. The harem of Arabic culture, however, physically confines Hajila and subjects her to abuse. Only in repurposing the Arabic script and confronting its legacy can Isma

be a true sister to Hajila and allow women to move beyond the harem. Djébar's read of Dinarzade as the savior and protector of Scheherazade, the embodiment of true sisterhood, allows us to ultimately frame Isma's decision to take back her veil and step into the shadows at the end of the text as an act of solidarity and defiance.

My second chapter examines how Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* tears down and problematizes the prospect of sisterhood for the women of *The Odyssey*, suggesting the impossibility of alliance in a world wherein women are both complicit in and the victims of men's crimes. I will argue that Atwood intentionally highlights the theatricality and fragility of roles presented in Homer's text to question the authenticity of any of the alliances within it. She repositions Penelope's central concern from her marriage with Odysseus to her maternal role with the twelve murdered maids. Her central motivation also shifts from her loyalty to Odysseus to her obsessive competition with Helen of Troy. In handing the authority of the narrative to the murdered maids, whose chorus critiques Penelope's own account, Atwood questions Penelope's suitability as a heroine because she supports a system which refuses to condemn male heroes for their violence against other women.

Through this investigation into how contemporary writers use myth, I will identify the complications and rewards inherent for female authors who wish to appropriate the complex and often misunderstood tales of mythic female heroines.

CHAPTER I:

Competition Between Mythical Woman, Shadow Sultanas, and Djinni Consorts: The Re-appropriation of *Arabian Nights* in Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Scheherazade*

Lying in the sultan's bed covered in his sweat and ejaculation, Scheherazade finishes one fantastical story, and her sister Dinarzade quickly praises her words. Scheherazade replies, "That is nothing compared to what I could tell you tomorrow night if the king would spare my life and let me live" (Zipes, 36).⁴ Captivated by Scheherazade's stories, King Shahryār agrees to keep her alive another night to hear more. The image of the intelligent young woman weaving a tale to avoid death takes hold of the imagination. Assia Djebar envisions this heroine for a modern age as she crafts *A Sister to Scheherazade*, a text deeply in conversation with its legendary namesake.

The traditional story of *Arabian Nights* is the tale of one woman's quest to end a sultan's senseless slaughter. When King Shahryār and his brother Shah Zaman discover their wives, the sultanas, have been sleeping with other men, they set out to find someone who has experienced greater misfortune than them. They encounter a djinni, a powerful supernatural being, who has kidnapped a mortal woman to be his consort. The djinni's consort has sex with them and later claims to have made love to over five hundred men while the powerful djinni slept unaware. In response to this third woman's betrayal, the brothers agree that women cannot be trusted. They both vow to marry a new virgin bride every night, sleep with her, and execute her in the morning (Zipes, 6-12).

⁴ I will use Jack Zipes's translation of *Arabian Nights* (1991) throughout this thesis. He bases his work on Richard P. Burton's translation (1885-6), which was considered one of the more accurate accounts. Zipes attempts to "rework Burton's accurate but difficult translation into a more modern English idiom while trying to retain the flavor of his original" (ix).

Shahryār's vizier, forced to find wives for the sultan and to then kill them, eventually struggles to provide new brides. His daughter, Scheherazade, asks her father to offer her as Shahryār's new wife on one condition: that her sister Dinarzade be permitted to remain in the room with her throughout her night with the sultan. Shahryār agrees. Scheherazade asks her sister to wake her an hour before dawn to request to hear a story before Scheherazade's execution. The sisters put this plan into effect, Scheherazade telling a tale, stopping halfway, and promising the sultan she will finish if only he will spare her life one more day (Zipes, 12-13). In this way, Scheherazade manages to prevent her execution for 1,001 nights, and eventually the sultan agrees to marry her and remove the threat of death. As al-Musawi contends, "Quite literally, storytelling saves Scheherazade's life" (xv). Such a figure is a natural choice for another storyteller intent on bringing myth into her work.

Assia Djébar, as a female Algerian novelist, is engaged in a struggle to grant new identity and life to her formerly colonized country's stagnated cultural traditions while simultaneously acknowledging the deep misogyny of pre-colonial Maghrebian patriarchy. Structured around the *harem*, what Djébar refers to as the "Tradition" kept women sequestered in a separate part of the household from the age of ten, able to interact only with each other or their husbands and male relatives (1, 128). They were veiled from the rest of the world and not permitted to leave the house except to go to the *hammams* (Turkish baths) or to the mosque.⁵ As Evelyn Accad puts it, in harem-based society, "women are born to fill the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, to be successively subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons...the law permits a husband or

⁵ In *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasure: Representing the Harem, 1800-1875* (2002), Joan DelPlato notes the complexities of defining the harem, especially for a Western audience inundated with a highly sensationalized version of it through stories like *The Arabian Nights*. Malek Alloula, et. al. also provides a useful examination of the harem through the colonial context in *The Colonial Harem*. NED - New edition ed., vol. 21, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

father to force his wife or daughter to remain home, often literally under lock and key” (802). While the French colonization of Algeria (1848-1962) challenged the harem, it did not eradicate the practice (Mortimer, “Fleeing the Harem,” 156-8). The mythical image of Scheherazade and her shield of storytelling offers a competing narrative for Algerian femininity. It allows Djébar to point to the strength of the pre-colonial female, as well as the restrictions her post-colonial daughters must eradicate.

To successfully address the complex cultural situation, *A Sister to Scheherazade* must reconstitute the central conflict of *Arabian Nights* from women betraying men to women betraying women. Djébar must reposition “the ideal female” to reflect how women behave in relation to other women rather than how women behave in relation to the Man. Arabic tradition does not merely allow for this shift in focus from male-female to female-female, but Djébar argues such a transition is only fully available through embracing her culture. Her novel both acknowledges Scheherazade as an acceptable gender role model of the past and highlights the importance of the women around her, those with whom she should never have been in competition. In calling upon *Arabian Nights* as a template for her new narrative, Djébar allows herself to fully explore the problematic issue of the liberated “female” in modern Algerian society.

Throughout my discussion of gender and gender identity, I am following Judith Butler’s maxim that “all gender identity is performed or enacted” (900). In Butlerian theory, our cultural environment teaches us how to perform gender acceptably. For instance, Scheherazade is identified as the ideal female in *Arabian Nights* because she “was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred” (13). Shahryār, in contrast, is shown as a worthy male because he “was a mighty king” and “ruled the kingdom with such justice...equity and fairness” that “he

was beloved by all people in his realm” (2). Scheherazade’s role involves being pleasing, whereas Shahryār’s involves gaining respect and love through leadership. Because we learn gender norms from society and change society through how we perform, “gender is in no way a stable identity...rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler, 900). The gender norms of Algeria are in flux, as shown through Isma, Hajila, and the other female characters who saunter on and off the stage of *Sister to Scheherazade*. What is acceptable behavior for the French-leaning Isma or her daughter Meriem is not acceptable behavior for Arabic-centric Hajila or her sister Kenza. The two families that Djébar places center-stage have different scripts for gender acceptability and one is privileged above the other. Pre-colonial *Arabian Nights* also privileges very particular and clearly defined gendered scripts for its characters.

I

To fully understand how Djébar re-appropriates *Arabian Nights*, it is necessary to first examine the gender dynamics present in the dominant narrative from which she draws. For the purposes of this paper, the framing of the story is more important than the tales themselves. It is helpful to focus in on two groups of women who are performing their gender identity in different ways in order to control their narratives: the two original disloyal sultanas and the djinni’s consort find their power through redefining the feminine whereas Scheherazade and Dinarzade find power in performing female gender identity well. Despite the instability at the heart of gender identity, it is to be noted that gender is important to society and that refusing to play the proper role can be very dangerous: “Gender is a project which has cultural survival at its end, the

term ‘strategy’ better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (Butler, 903). Nowhere is this potential for punishment quite as clear as in *Arabian Nights*. Scheherazade must perform her role to perfection, fulfilling the desires of the king both sexually and intellectually, in order to live to see the dawn. She succeeds, but the previous sultanas fail and pay for their missteps.

In *Arabian Nights* the primary threat our main character Shahryār faces comes from the possibility of women who cannot be fully controlled, particularly women whose sexual experiences are not under male authority. The instigating betrayal in *Arabian Nights* is perpetrated by three unfaithful female characters. The text opens with the kings Shahryār and Shah Zaman discovering their wives’ infidelities. This betrayal renders both kings impotent and sickly. Losing sexual control arguably leads to metaphorical feminization for the kings, who lose their “health and become weak” (7). Confused, the two brothers depart on a journey to see if any man has experienced greater misfortune than they have in being cuckolded. They quickly encounter a djinni and his consort, who, the djinni claims, was stolen from her bridal bed, kept under water in a coffin, and knows no man but him. When the djinni falls asleep, however, the female consort demands the two brothers “mount” her or she will wake the djinni and he will attack them (11). After a reluctant “mounting,” the djinni’s consort proclaims that “destiny cannot be averted or hindered by anything and that whatever a woman wants, she will get, no matter how much a man might try to prevent it” (11). She tells the brothers she has had sexual relations with over 500 men. It is this statement of female sexual control (despite the consort’s apparent enslavement to her djinni master) that convinces both brothers to marry virgins, take

their maidenhood at night, and have them executed at dawn to avoid any more cuckoldry (11-12).

The original sultanas and djinni's consort change the brothers' scripts for what constitutes the feminine. As Shah Zaman proclaims: "May Allah help us and save us from women's malice and cunning! It seems nothing can surpass their power" (11)! Previously, women were concubines and loyal wives, but, in the face of three betrayals within such a short time frame, Shahryār and Shah Zaman decide that *all* females are fundamentally incapable of remaining loyal and will seek to dominate men. Shahryār becomes "convinced that there never was or could be one chaste woman upon the face of this earth" (12). To decide to "never stay married long enough for women to betray us" (12) is to decide that betrayal is inevitable.

In "Second Sex," Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that this script change should not happen; the mythic ideal of Women is difficult to erase from any culture, because it would mean eradicating "the Eternal Feminine" (1266). Hence, when the sultanas transgress, the kings should not redefine the script for female, but rather decide that "the women concerned are not feminine" (Beauvoir, 1265). Women who fail to live up to the assigned script are cast outside of it as Other. It is not that all women transgress, but rather that these particular women have failed to *be* Woman, have fallen short of the Eternal Feminine. In *Arabian Nights*, however, the men's behavior is inconsistent with Beauvoir's paradigm, leading the kings to set up the ridiculous premise of marrying a virgin and taking her life at dawn. Instead of ridding the society of those who fail to live up to the gendered script, they try to redefine the script itself, deciding that all women inherently must be unfaithful in order to be women. Ironically, Scheherazade's challenge over the course of her 1001 nights is to re-set the ideal of the Eternal Feminine while making room for the idea that women who fail to achieve this end are not true women.

To hand Scheherazade such a task is problematic because it sets her in opposition to the other female characters in her story. If Femininity is the enemy, all women are in solidarity against the Man. If the Man has the right to reward “good” women and punish “bad” women, women are then competing against each other rather than seeing the trap that is the harem. Within the confines of her gendered script, Scheherazade can only counter the prescriptive narrative of dangerous feminine sexuality insofar as she convinces the king that not all women will be unfaithful. She cannot and does not fundamentally question the moral inferiority of the djinni’s consort or the sultanas. Nor does Scheherazade manage to eradicate the original sultanas’ perceived guilt in the murder of the many innocent virgins. Shahryār agrees to acknowledge that, while what he “experienced on the part of women” was horrendous, “the kings of the Chosroes suffered greater misfortunes” at the hands of other false women (578). The king comes to his senses because he agrees women have done worse to other men than what the first sultana did to him, and that these women are not acceptable representations of the female gender. Scheherazade manages, in reaffirming the original script of femininity, to save some women, but it is at the expense of others.

Within the frame story, *Arabian Nights* delivers three female transgressors and their crimes against the ideal of the Eternal Feminine. The djinni’s consort is a particularly fascinating figure. A supernaturally powerful being kidnaps her against her will, keeps her utterly confined, and, presumably, engages in frequent non-consensual sex with her. Her only means of controlling the situation is to reclaim her sexuality through aggressively sleeping with other men. This is her way of taking what she wants, even while the djinni attempts to prevent it. Importantly, the sex the consort engages in is a form of control. It does not allow her to escape

her imprisonment, but rather makes that prison bearable. In allowing herself even this small freedom, however, the consort commits a gross violation of the feminine script.

Likewise, both sultans' first wives also take their own lovers, with whom they engage in copious sex whenever the two men are out of sight. They, like the consort, seem entranced by their own passions and blinded to the real danger the kings' discovery could bring about. Because the djinni's consort is meant to be a direct corollary to the sultanas, it follows that the reason both wives are unfaithful is similar to that of this other female figure. The implication is that the sultanas, like the djinni's consort, were forced into marriage against their wills and kept in virtual prison so their husbands could maintain their purity. That both kings have a number of concubines (thus exposing the double-standard of these gender norms) is perhaps less significant than the fact that neither of the sultanas are given any dialogue, physical description, nor characterization until they transgress. They are invisible and unimportant to the text until they break their scripts and take on the identity of the Unfaithful Woman. All women in the text are inconsequential until their actions directly threaten the kings.

The sultanas are the only characters whom we see engage in mutually fulfilling and passionate sexual relations without any apparent coercive elements present. Both sultanas have their affairs with blackamoors.⁶ Shah Zaman comes across his wife "asleep on his own couch, and in her arms she held the black cook" (4). The couple is so intertwined in their sleep that Shah Zaman is able to "cut the two into four pieces with a single blow" (4). Meanwhile, Shahryār's sultana "cried out in a loud voice" to her lover who "rushed up to her and threw his arms around

⁶ The racially-charged language present in the depiction of the sultanas' lovers (which appears during several of the tales as well) has been discussed at length elsewhere. See particularly Nussbaum, Felicity A. "Slavery, Blackness and Islam: The Arabian Nights in the Eighteenth Century." *Essays and Studies*, 2007. Pp 150-172.; Thorn, Jennifer. "The Work of Writing Race: Galland, Burton, and The Arabian Nights." *Monstrous Dreams of Reason: Body, Self, and Reason in the Enlightenment*. Laura J. Rosenthal and Mita Choudhury. Lewisburg: Bucknell Press, 2002.

her neck while she embraced him just as warmly” (5-6). Later in the text she continues to express genuine joy and passion in the presence of her lover: “The lady laughed heartily, and they began to satisfy their lust and continued to do so for a couple of hours” (9). While an argument can be made that this “lust” is out of control, and it is certainly not prudent, there are no other examples in the framing narrative of couples who both desire each other and enjoy the sexual act. The djinni’s consort is cold and calculating, using her sexuality as a weapon; Scheherazade must permit the king’s desire in order to live to see the morning; the sultanas, however, genuinely appear to love their chosen partners even if that love destroys them.

The kings see this love as a threat, and their wives’ passion for their lovers serves to increase the severity of their punishments. Women, after all, are not supposed to be the desiring partners, and their desires are certainly not meant to be directed at men to whom they do not belong. Beauvoir contends that “few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of woman: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse” (1267). Violence against female gender transgressors in *Arabian Nights* is almost always positioned as the fault of the woman herself for transgression, even within Scheherazade’s moral teachings. When Shah Zaman kills his “damned whore” of a wife and her lover while they sleep entangled, he contemplates with great melancholy “how could she [his wife] have brought about her own death” (4)? Shahryār, when he discovers the double murder his brother committed, agrees that it was only practical: “You’ve escaped many an evil deed by putting your wife to death” (7). Not only is violence acceptable, but it is also necessary when women do not properly perform their assigned script. Moments after Shahryār “slew all the concubines and their mamelukes” (12) for their betrayal, he “marries” his first virgin bride and regains his masculine authority, shaking off his impotence. In destroying the transgressors, Shahryār reclaims his sexual power.

While *Arabian Nights* clearly positions Shahryār's murder of his many virgin wives as morally wrong—Scheherazade will argue for their innocence and adherence to the script for the feminine—the text suggests his brutality is emotionally justified for him due to his first wife's betrayal. Shahryār's actions are improper, but the text reminds us, multiple times, that he was betrayed first. He overreacts, yes, but his pain is considered valid. When the disloyal sultana breaks with the rules of her gender, she is painted in the blood of her virgin sisters and held responsible. The king's accountability is mediated through her, and he ultimately achieves redemption rather than any moral reckoning.

In order to escape the threat of violence, Scheherazade must show her king master that she is not like the unfaithful sultanas and consorts. Because she is attempting to reteach her husband what truly constitutes the ideal feminine, the sultan's new bride only has power within the context of her own capitulation to his sexual advances. She cannot engage in the sexual liberation in which the previous sultanas take part. Scheherazade's life is viable only as long as she is the king's plaything, and the text denotes her as anything but an active participant in sexual congress: "That night he had his will of Scheherazade, as was his wont" (36). The king and Scheherazade do not make love or even have sex. *They* do not do anything. He acts upon her. In this, Scheherazade becomes the foil for the djinni's consort (who all but rapes the two male kings) but in doing so she must occupy the space of the unwilling partner. She does not suggest that a man and a woman can have mutual sexual relations nor that women should be equal partners in the sexual act. As Scheherazade herself explains, "*he* has had *his* carnal pleasure with me" (21; emphasis mine). Scheherazade is merely an outlet for the king's desires. When the king has "his will of Scheherazade," she is expected to lie passively and allow him to take his pleasure.

Scheherazade's position is further complicated when we consider how her story ends. Scheherazade's ultimate release from her fearful position is not achieved through any direct value towards herself, but rather the value she has as a mother. When she has at long last run out of stories after three years, she calls forth her three sons and begs the king to spare her life: "Oh king, these are your children, and I request that you release me from the doom of death as a dole to these infants, for if you kill me, they will be motherless, and you will find nobody among all the women in your realm to raise them as they should be raised" (577). Scheherazade begs the king not to kill her through suggesting that no other women has the necessary femininity to raise her children right. Her ultimate value is determined through her maternal skill. Scheherazade's imprisonment is for the sins of another woman's promiscuity, and her release must be couched in terms of sexual fidelity and maternity. As Shahryār says in explaining why he will formally marry Scheherazade, "I have found her pure and pious, chaste and ingenuous, and Allah has granted me three sons through her" (578). The ideal eternal feminine is re-established.

Despite these very real issues of power and competition, it is important to note that the women of *Arabian Nights* "were not helpless victims of circumstance, but rather active participants in the events around them" (Jorgensen, 10). They already have a degree of empowerment granted to them that exceeds that of many Western myths of the female even while they often must function in more limiting environments. Beauty and passivity do not alone define Scheherazade as the model woman. In fact, the only scene in which her beauty is even mentioned occurs right before her "real" marriage when she and Dinarzade try on several dresses in front of their soon-to-be husbands (581). Rather, Scheherazade is pleasing in her manners and her intellect, as well as her benevolence which is "a means for saving his [Allah's] creatures

from oppression and slaughter”(578)! While sexual submission is required to achieve the ideal feminine, Scheherazade is not a passive character nor is she asked to be one.

Scheherazade manages to actively use her gender to place herself above the other female characters in the text. The new sultana is playing within the guidelines of a script, but she acts her gender with grace and skill to push the boundaries of that script. She takes action to save innocent lives and prevent future slaughter: “I’d become ransom for the virgin daughters of Moslems and rescue them from his [King Shahryār’s] hands and yours,” she tells her father, the king’s vizier and executioner (13). This is within the feminine script: it is an act of mercy and it can even be described as submissive insofar as Scheherazade becomes a literal sacrifice at the altar of the sultan’s desire. The action is also performed in the context of being both a good daughter (her father, unable to find any more virgins, fears execution), and a good subject to her king. While her actions all fit within her assigned gender script, however, it is important to note that Scheherazade is not a victim forced into an impossible situation, like the djinni’s consort. Rather she is a woman who walks knowingly into rape and possible murder in order to save others.

Further, Scheherazade uses her vast knowledge and education to save herself. Translator Jack Zipes contends that “the primary concern of all the major tales [of *Arabian Nights*] is survival through artistic narration” (589). Characters in tight situations turn to story in the hope of weaving a spell of mercy around their listeners. The king does not keep Scheherazade alive for his sexual pleasure but rather for her tales. Hence, Scheherazade’s voice becomes the source of “sanity and mercy” (Zipes, 589) throughout the text, and her stories win over the king. Scheherazade defies the will of both her father (who forbids her to give herself to the king) and

her king (who has sworn to slaughter her). She is a Desdemona who could better distract Othello or a Helen who convinced Menelaus to sanction her escape to Troy.

Despite the fact that she is inherently competing against the sultanas, the consort, and even the murdered virgins insofar as she succeeds where they fail, Scheherazade *does* have one female companion with whom she stands in solidarity. Rather than being solely focused on the men in her life, Scheherazade's closest friend and ally is another woman: her sister Dinarzade. Scheherazade addresses all her tales to Dinarzade and refuses to be parted from her. While Dinarzade is given little characterization in the text other than being willing to help Scheherazade and remembering to ask for more tales, it is not surprising that Djebbar, who wishes to push women away from competition, brings her to the forefront of her novel. In his afterword to *Arabian Nights*, Zipes defines Scheherazade's role as threefold: she is to educate Shahryār on ethics and de-demonize the female, she is to educate readers on the same and, significantly, she is to give her sister the wisdom to succeed in a world run by men: "In fact, Scheherazade teaches Dinarzade how to plot and narrate her own destiny to achieve an autonomous voice, which receives due respect from Shahryār at the conclusion of the tales" (587). Through Scheherazade's efforts to protect her sister as well as Dinarzade's efforts to protect Scheherazade, the conclusion of *Arabian Nights* does not merely end in Scheherazade's marriage to King Shahryār, but also Dinarzade's marriage to the king's brother. The new sultana begs that Shah Zaman forsake his kingdom so that the two families can live side-by-side, because Scheherazade cannot bear to be parted from her sister for "more than an hour" (580).

II

This flawed yet alluringly complicated story of *Arabian Nights* becomes the gendered script Djébar sets out to rewrite. Scheherazade is the strong narrator who, alongside her loving sister, manages to stay a king's hand through her pure chastity, her nerve, her tales, and her offspring. She survives at the expense of several women sacrificed prior to her marriage for daring to claim sexuality for themselves. I argue that Djébar pays homage to these women of *Arabian Nights* in the figures of Isma and Hajila. Neither are a direct correlation to any one character. Instead, Djébar reconstructs the narrative to subvert underlying assumptions about the ideal feminine. She specifically disputes the necessity for competition between women and challenges the binary categorization of women as “good” or “bad” on display in the earlier narrative.

A Sister to Scheherazade is the story of two women who are both wives of the same man. Isma, the liberated narrator, is an Algerian-born woman who was educated abroad and has spent much of her adult life in France. She was in a passionate marriage with the Man (who remains nameless) and has one daughter called Meriem. At the start of the novel, she has returned to Algeria in part to reclaim her daughter, who has been living with the Man. Hajila is a young woman raised in the traditional Arabic culture. Sometime before the narrative begins, Isma brokers a marriage with Hajila's mother between her former husband and Hajila. The younger woman enters into this loveless marriage and finds herself trapped in the Man's home. She begins to rebel—sneaking outside and often walking unveiled. While the Man is initially sexually uninterested in her, her relationship with him deteriorates after he violently rapes her. When Hajila discovers she is pregnant, she meets Isma in the *hamman* (the Turkish baths). Isma gives

Hajila the key to the house and tells her she alone can decide whether or not to keep the baby. At the end of the novel, Hajila throws herself into traffic in order to abort her unborn child, and Isma takes her daughter Meriem from the Man to return to her mother's village and take up the veil.

The novel's structure is unusual and allows Djébar to provide further commentary. Isma is the first person narrator and the narration of Hajila's story is done in second person, implying that Isma imagines what happens to her. Isma directly addresses her story to Hajila throughout. There are also several sections which retell the story of Scheherazade and Dinarzade spread throughout the novel.

Sister to Scheherazade is an inaccurate English translation of the original French *Ombre sultane*. *Ombre sultane* literally means "shadow sultana" and both words in the original French are feminine nouns. The concept of sisterhood is not directly present in the original title, nor is Scheherazade singled out as a character. Further, while *ombre* in context means "shadow," it can also translate to shade or it can mean "to live in obscurity, in the darkness, or behind bars" (Prabhu, 84-5). The title posits an important question as to how to be both a shadow and a sultana. It implies power that is not only obscure and hidden but also trapped: mysterious power. It could refer to Scheherazade, who is a sultana throughout her narrative but cannot declare it due to the threat of death; Dinarzade, who sleeps in her sister's shadow; the original sultanas, who have transgressed into the shadows of death; or even the djinni's consort, who is a sultana of the realm of supernatural shadows. Further, the title could refer to more than one person; the two words are necessarily confrontational yet inseparable. As Anjali Prabhu comments, "the English translation of the title is not able to convey this battle, this interlocking of the two entities. The French *ombre sultane*...pairs the two [words] in an impossible, yet unbreakable, union. "Shadow

sultana”—not “shadow of the sultana”...not “sultana of the shadow...not even “shadow and sultana”” (Prabhu, 85). These two concepts which are linguistically incapable of being joined are linked irrevocably. The transgressor behind her bars and the sultana in her moral virtue become one in the same.

The title immediately introduces the complex position of women in Algerian society as both those who perpetuate the harem and are subjected to it. In commenting on Djébar’s short story collection *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*, Mohanalakshmi Rajakumar points out that the writer is particularly concerned with the pressures women place on each other in order to maintain the cultural norms: “Djébar questions how women exposed to change are forced back into tradition through the use of a counter-character within each family narrative. In doing so she examines the various ways women are used against each other to enforce social dictates” (58). Scheherazade is not able to force her king to progress towards accepting all women as persons over whom he should not hold the power of life and death. She can only limit the damage through reminding him that some women are worthy. In Djébar’s retelling, this solution will not be acceptable.

Djébar’s principle task in her re-appropriation is transforming *Arabian Nights* into a tale told between women rather than one between the Man and his women. In *Sister to Scheherazade*, the main character is not King Shahryār and the central conflict not his distrust of Women. Djébar shifts the focus to Dinarzade, the co-conspirator, the woman in the shadows, and the only woman with whom Scheherazade is not in direct competition in *Arabian Nights*. In fact, as Djébar points out, Dinarzade and Scheherazade cannot be in competition with each other because “for the polygamist, any female blood relation of his wife is taboo” (95). Dinarzade is off limits

to the Man and therefore not a threat to Scheherazade or her position with the Man. Because they are not rivals, they can support each other in their goals.

Rather than merely showing Scheherazade and her attentive king, then, Djébar pans out to capture the entire room: “Up above, the sultan’s bride spins her tales; she is fighting for her life. Her sister, beneath the couch, rallies the past victims” (99). This image of female solidarity, of a sister ready to catch the storyteller if she falls, is an image taken for granted in *Arabian Nights*, but it becomes the crux of the conflict in Djébar’s story: “What if Scheherazade were to be continually reborn, only to die again at every dawn, just because a second woman, a third, a fourth, did not take up her post in her shadow, in her voice, in her night” (143)? If Dinarzade forsakes her role as helper, then other women must fall.

Women must unite because, as Accad notes of female Middle Eastern writers, “Personal rebellion...is of little use when the entire structure of the surrounding society militates against the exercise of individual freedom” (801). Instead writers like Djébar escape the harem through “universalizing the questions of individual freedom that confront the female characters” (Accad, 801). Part of this refocus on Dinarzade is an attempt to show us the true threat for women, which is not other women breaking the ideal female script, but the underlying patriarchy, the entire concept of ideal femininity itself. The Scheherazade of *Arabian Nights* re-imposes a hierarchy of women—separating those who play their gender well from those who play it poorly—so as to ensure her own life. Djébar’s Isma and Hajila, however, must break this hierarchy to join in solidarity. Such a combined rebellion, however, is arguably more complicated in Djébar’s Algeria than it would perhaps have been in the times when *Arabian Nights* was first compiled.

As Lucette Valensi explains in “The Scheherazade Syndrome (2002),” Djébar’s task is complicated because women have *two* layers of oppression in modern Algeria and only one of

them existed in Scheherazade's time: the problems of Tradition and the harem have become more complex in face of French colonialism. This colonial legacy, not present in the days of *Arabian Nights*, has made the re-appropriation of femininity more difficult. The French occupation brought with it a whole *new* set of restrictions for how female characters are portrayed in Algeria. As Jeana Jorgensen contends, "The Oriental woman has always represented a particularly contested terrain in relation to colonialism. She has been the space upon which many prejudices and misconceptions have been mapped" (2-3). Over the course of French invasion, the original gender issues of the country further split into two distinct scripts for what constitutes the feminine. The French, to a degree, defined both scripts. The script of the harem was rooted in the Arabic world, but, under French colonial rule, became the script of the disempowered and dismissed. The morally active yet sexually submissive femininity which Scheherazade upheld was frowned upon within the colonial context. Meanwhile a second script, a foreign script, falls more in line with the djinni's consort and the sultanas, yet this script comes with dangers of rampant sexual desire and superficial competition. The divide Djébar attempts to bridge between Hajila (rooted in the Arabic script) and Isma (firmly held in the French script) in order to end the competition between women is a divide between two understandings of the Eternal Feminine.

Djébar's linguistic choices reveal which of these two scripts is privileged within her society. French is inherently the language of the colonizer, or, as David Kelley puts it bluntly "the language in which Djébar writes is in another sense the language of the Enemy, of the Other...It is the language of the violator of her country" (2). Isma and The Man can speak fluent French and Arabic, but Isma writes in French and addresses Hajila in French despite the fact that Hajila can *only* speak Arabic. The children of the novel only speak the language of the colonizer,

suggesting a shift in linguistic supremacy. Accepting French, as Valensi notes, could be perceived as accepting colonization (142). Despite the fact that “French was stigmatized as a symptom of cultural alienation” (Valensi, 145), it is also the language of empowerment in *Sister to Scheherazade*; the character who narrates and the characters with the most perceived freedom are those who speak the language of France. Isma may well choose this because “Arabic, the language in which the husband is the Other, the enemy, is the language of the harem, of the veil, of the seclusion and confinement of women” (Kelley, 2). Isma, in her quest to escape the harem, rejects the language she associates with it, even as this rejection makes her entire address to Hajila incomprehensible to the other woman.

In addition to a literal language barrier, Mildred Mortimer points out that Isma, unlike Hajila, has never experienced the harem in its entirety. She has been educated outside of the country and was granted the freedoms of the Western world during her life in France and in French schools:

Neither veiled nor cloistered, Isma never encounters the full weight of patriarchy.

The protagonist retraces the novelist's trajectory and, like her, is separated through schooling from the traditional world of the women of her childhood—her grandmothers, aunts, cousins, and mother—and from experiences of enclosure that mark their lives. At the age at which her cousins were veiled, Djébar's father sent her as a boarding student to a colonial secondary school (223).

Isma, like Djébar herself, is aware of the harem's cultural demands on women, but has not experienced them directly. She is forced to imagine a second woman, a Hajila, to confront the life-that-could-have-been-but-never-was.

The seeming simplicity of resetting *Arabian Nights* in a time where Scheherazade does not literally fear for her life is complicated through the reality of the once colonial world. The divide between sisters in modern Algeria has never loomed larger. We may be tempted to suggest that the Western world of France equates with freedom whereas the traditional world of the harem equates with enslavement and restrictions. The expected narrative demands that Isma guide Hajila out to a new world, having both women cast off the veil and claim a “liberated” female identity. Isma clearly sees herself in this role throughout the vast majority of the novel. Yet there are different ways of defining freedom, and Djebbar does not allow us simple answers. Accad suggests that assuming Western liberation as the goal of Eastern women is problematic and that Djebbar, across her fictional repertoire, continually suggests that “the Eastern mindset tend[s] to emphasize and value private rather than public life, in contradiction to the Western approach, which tend[s] to value the public display and outward control of others...liberating a woman in an Eastern culture often result[s] in thrusting her into a cruel and competitive world for which she [i]s unprepared and in which she might have no wish to participate” (808). Western “liberation,” for Djebbar, conflicts with the desire to end competition between women. It creates its own form of barriers through its focus on image and its demand for a particular type of public performance.

Instead of creating a new binary wherein the gender script of France is desirable and the gender script of Algeria is rejected, Djebbar attempts to subvert and challenge both approaches. As Tara Mendola discusses, “the commercially (and, in some cases, culturally) desired narrative of female oppression followed by an acceptance of Western values may, in the hands of a talented author, be complicated, given nuance, and deeply problematized” (229). Djebbar clearly is not interested in merely showing her female characters reaching a form of Western

enlightenment about what constitutes “women.” Djébar takes *Arabian Nights* and re-crafts it not only to show the importance of its female characters, but also to attempt to create a female Algerian identity that moves beyond the harem and does not bow to the invader and orientalism.

Because of this push for something beyond the “accepted narrative,” both the characters of Hajila and Isma have to come to their own forms of enlightenment. For Isma, this involves flipping the script on the original *Arabian Nights*. While Isma compares herself to both Scheherazade and Dinarzade, her initial role in the text parallels that of the sultanas and the djinni’s consort. She is the character in the text who most desires sexual union, and she is more rampant in her desires than even the Man. As a “liberated” French female, Isma’s sexual passion finds its echo only in the sultanas’ adulterous affairs. Initially, she, like the sultanas, sees this union as mutually fulfilling, but it eventually becomes an unhealthy power struggle between herself and the Man that far more resembles the djinni’s consort’s relationship with the djinni. When she and the Man are together, “we...take refuge in the waiting bed. Our simplest actions are an effort; our throats constricted with craving; our eyes grow heavy, blinded” (65). The description of desire is placed as an outside force imposed upon the two lovers. It is a “craving” that “blinds” them. Later on the same page Isma refers to sex as a “sudden surrender” (65). What appears to be sexual liberation, therefore, might in fact be, as Isma later recognizes herself, a new form of enslavement.

Isma uses the plural first person throughout her description of all sexual encounters, suggesting a unity between herself and the Man. The desire for an equal relationship between man and woman, while progressive, might not yet be possible given the nature of patriarchy. Prabhu suggests that “Isma’s ‘collaboration’ (establishing a ‘we’ in a way) with the man...is a significant obstacle to the sisterhood theme” in the novel (79). I would go further to suggest that

her connection to the Man, and particularly her desire for sexual fulfillment, serve to put her in a position of submission. After a particularly ardent sexual encounter in which Isma makes trouble for the sake of making trouble (resembling the djinni's consort in doing so), our narrator starts "begging for love, for forgiveness...it is all my fault. We embrace, the man lets himself be swayed by the tone of supplication" (67). Further she fantasizes about being submissive: "I imagine myself pleading" (66), and the Man notices when "her gestures have not the soft curves of surrender" (66). Isma, given the freedom of the sultanas without the fear of being slaughtered, fantasizes about Scheherazade's forced surrender. Fearing that she will allow herself to become ensnared, Isma decides to desert her Man not for a lover or to escape one, as the sultanas of the past attempted to do, but "I did one better, I left him for myself" (86). Realizing that her desire for the Man has made her dependent upon him, she knows the only solution is to remove herself from the relationship.

Isma's role as the sexually active sultana, as the Scheherazade who flees the kingdom when she realizes her own imprisonment, is complicated because, in a reversal of the original Scheherazade myth, Isma's ultimate freedom from the Man comes at the cost of another woman's destruction. *Sister to Scheherazade* begins with Isma dismissing the possibility of any sisterly rivalry only to immediately suggest her dismissal is premature: "two women who are not sisters, not even rivals, although...they are both the wives of the same man" (1). Isma opens the text in a lamentation for what she perceives as an act of deceit and cruelty. Our narrator has brokered a marriage between her former husband and Hajila. Whereas Scheherazade offered herself to save innocents from harm, Isma rightfully sees herself in a different role: "Did I intend to offer you up as a sacrifice to the harem? Did I intend to model myself on the queens of the harem? These, by presenting a new bride to their master, were in fact liberating themselves" (1).

The possibility that Isma has betrayed her sister-figure and failed in her role as Dinarzade is the narrator's central conflict in the text. She struggles to understand whether her liberation, like Scheherazade's before her, came at the expense of another woman and whether or not this would be justified. Scheherazade had the excuse of a death threat in dismissing those who have come before her; Isma struggles to understand her own reasoning in throwing Hajila to the Man. Her entire act of narration is an attempt to bridge the gap between herself and Hajila, to put herself into the position of Hajila, though this attempt becomes troublesome in of itself.

Because Isma controls the narrative as the story-teller, she also controls how we see Hajila. Prabhu argues that Isma's voice is highly problematic because Isma, in playing her script of the female, succeeds in placing herself above Hajila, particularly in regards to her own desirability: "Isma's omniscient narration turns out to be, without a doubt, a dominating discourse, much like colonial discourses, and bears the traits of the struggle to sustain this dominance as an authoritarian narrator and as the dominant, or at least more desirable, character" (Prabhu, 85). In crafting a narrative for Hajila, Isma has taken control of the other woman's story. Prabhu argues this elegantly, suggesting that not only does the I/you relationship make Hajila into the subject of Isma's words, but that Isma also inadvertently compares herself and Hajila, always painting the other woman as inadequate. This triumph of competition is, ironically, one of outward beauty, a trait Western scripts of the ideal female have always demanded, but one which *Arabian Nights* thought to be secondary in Scheherazade's desirability. While Isma's assigned script for the perfect feminine is different than Scheherazade's, she arguably is encountering the same trap as her mother story-teller. The Man desires Isma, the two have an intense sexual relationship, but the Man has no desire for Hajila: "The image of Isma, object of male desire, is constantly reinforced, while the question of Hajila's desirability from the

heterosexual male perspective is constantly elided” (Prabhu, 79). However unintentionally, Isma, in playing her gender script, has brought in the very competition she seeks to avoid. She has made Hajila her rival and ensured that she, Isma, will win the competition.

Isma, then, is the woman who went too far in one direction. She played with the ideal of French femininity and took control of her sexuality, but in doing so she submerged herself in a culture that was not her own and lost touch with her sisters and their struggle. She sought to play Dinarzade but failed to wake in time to save Scheherazade. Worse, she fled from the harem, and therefore allowed Scheherazade’s story to falter. Her only means of crafting the solidarity she craves is to return to Algeria, return to her daughter, and to re-enter the harem: “I too want to put down roots. To wear the veil again, in my own fashion...To retreat into the shadows; bury myself” (156). When Isma leaves France and its form of liberation, she does so for other women: Hajila and Meriem.

In moving abroad and forsaking her culturally expected role in the Arabic script, Isma hands over her daughter to the Man. As her former husband tells us, “But you insist on living abroad! You know the law wouldn’t let you have custody” (69)! Isma’s return to Algeria is predicated on reunion with her daughter (she, unlike Scheherazade, has not given the Man any sons) and on reclaiming her role as mother. Her secondary purpose is to connect with Hajila past the point of imaginings and to truly take on the role of Dinarzade. In order to complete this transformation, however, she must blend her prescribed ideas of the feminine and Hajila’s. Becoming a true sister requires her to give up certain privileges: “The second wife stands on the threshold, devouring the space, and now the first one can put on the veil, or go into hiding” (159). Isma must move from the competitive spotlight of French culture back into the shadows,

behind the veil. Her new role is outside of either script. Hers is the liberation of the veil donned to allow other women to survive.

Isma's return is an acknowledgement of the power of those who follow the Arabic script. Kelley notes that Arabic, despite being the language of the harem, "is also the language of complicity between women. The Arabic word for what comes out in French as "co-espouse," defining the relationship between women in terms of their relationship to the male, is a word which speaks of a relationship of solidarity between women, without reference to the man (Kelley, 2). While we may be tempted to view Arabic as an oppressive language and French as liberating for women, Arabic allows for discussions unique to the cultural situation. It is difficult to fully discuss the harem in a language that has never recognized this social institution. The word "derra," which refers to both "the new bride of the same man" but also refers to "wound" (91) only exists in Arabic; France has no equivalent to such a cultural practice. When Isma and Hajila meet, it can only be within *hammam*, the Turkish baths that function as "a temporary reprieve from the harem...a secret consolation to sequestered women" (152). Isma finally understands Hajila and her worth when she becomes "aware of your grace as a woman; your secret (And I remind myself that in my Arabic dialect, over and above the beauty that is celebrated in a woman, she is mostly praised for her 'secret')" (153). Isma, finally, in returning to the Arabic dialect, is able to see beyond physical appearances to the "grace" beneath. The ability for Isma to connect to Hajila is predicated on this Arabic understanding, the praiseworthy "secret" to which French has no equivalent.

Only in returning to Arabic roots can Djébar take away "the Man's" name throughout her text to "echo the words that are murmured in Arabic dialect in the bedroom" (1) Only in embracing and understanding her cultural "roots" can Isma acknowledge that the husband she

once loved is the Man who cruelly subjugates Hajila. In *Arabian Nights* female gender transgressors are refused names beyond their relationship to a man (the djinni's consort, the king's wife, the sultana to the sultan). *Sister of Scheherazade* gives the Man no name excepting his relationship to a woman (the husband, the father, the master). This technique universalizes the Man from an individual to a representation of all men just as the women in *Arabian Nights* become representational of all women. As Butler argues, "Although individual acts do work to maintain and reproduce systems of oppression and, indeed, any theory of personal political responsibility presupposes such a view, it doesn't follow that oppression is a sole consequence of such acts" (905). Neither Shahryār nor Shah Zaman, despite their awful crimes perpetrated on women in their text, represent the real problem. Rather The Man and all he entails provides the true central issue. Djebbar does not allow the Man the same redemption that King Shahryār is granted in *Arabian Nights* and does not allow readers tremendous sympathy for him. The Man has been betrayed by a wife, true. Like Shahryār and Shah Zaman, when Isma leaves the Man is rendered temporarily impotent and thus feminized. Unable to slay Isma given the limitations of his society, the Man instead laments her much as Shah Zaman lamented his wife's murder. During one such scene the Man "gets steadily more drunk," hangs "over the balcony," and "mutters, over and over again, wild-eyed" Isma's name (74). These scenes show the Man as pathetic and potentially descending into madness. They suggest that men suffer as much within the patriarchal system as their wives, a missed lesson within the context of the original story.

Perhaps more importantly, Djebbar moves violence against women from something told to something experienced. While *Arabian Nights* reports that Shahryār and Shah Zaman take various virgins into their beds and kill them in the morning, the text does not detail the execution. The most graphic images, the deaths of the sultanas, we see from the perspective of

the sultans. In *Sister to Scheherazade*, however, we are forced to experience, in graphic detail, the Man rape and beat Hajila repeatedly from her perspective. Like Shahryār, the Man regains his masculine power through an act of violence, but, unlike the mostly gore-free words of *Arabian Nights*, we are not spared “the blood spreading over the sheets” in *Sister to Scheherazade* (58). We see Hajila “being torn apart” (58). Her “burning pain” with “the penis...still in place” transforms into “blood-stained legs” (58). Her physical and mental anguish screams across the page, and readers are not granted the distance of *Arabian Nights*, which trivializes the act of sex, reducing Scheherazade to her virginity and casually proclaiming that “the king arose and did away with his bride’s maidenhead” (22). Hajila’s maidenhead is taken with violence and pain, and we are forced to feel every single thrust.

But even when Isma imagines these scenes of humiliation for Hajila, we see the narrator slowly discover Hajila’s strength, and, by extension, the strength of all the women following the Arabic script. Hajila must outwardly, like Scheherazade before her, lie passively “not daring to kick, not trying to escape” (58). Inwardly, however, Isma’s narrating voice grants Hajila a power the other woman never had in her sexual encounters: the refusal to surrender and the will towards defiance. During the rape, Hajila thinks of the street and her frequent unapproved ventures outside. She thinks of her secret power to exit the house. Afterwards she refuses to wash, to forgive, or to beg. She uses the Man’s transgression against him to attain her desires, and she hardens her heart. Isma becomes one with the Man, but Isma imagines that Hajila sees past him to the flawed system. She is Scheherazade enduring the rape in order to prevent the king from raping others. Isma discovers that beneath the surface, Hajila has her own life and liberty.

Hajila, in fact, has depths to her beyond what Isma will ever fully understand. For Beauvoir, central to the ideal female is a sense of “mystery.” Beauvoir suggests that “to say that

a woman is mystery is to say, not that she is silent, but that her language is not understood; she is there, but hidden behind veils; she exists beyond these uncertain appearances” (1268-69). The problem the two royal brothers face in *Arabian Nights* is one of trust; they look into the female “mystery” and decide it is dangerous, too dangerous, in fact, to allow it to live past the point that it gives them pleasure. Beauvoir notes that, essential to our myth of what constitutes the feminine is an impenetrability. To be feminine is to hold a mind unseen and unknowable. For Shahryār as well as the Man, “the unveiled mobile woman is a threat. Without veils to constrain her, she becomes a site of power, the power of looking” (Rajakumar). It is for this fear that the Man reacts so violently when he discovers Hajila has been walking “naked” through the streets. His violence against and threats to her all directly relate to vision: “I’ll put out your eyes and then you’ll never see again! And no one will ever see you either” (87)! The Man does not wish for his wife to see or be seen. He does not want her to take back her power in this way.

Isma can liberate Hajila partially because, within the narrative framework, Isma has already taken the power of the gaze for herself; she is the one who presents Hajila, who sees her, who, in recognizing her “secret” finds it a source of comfort rather than fear. “For Djébar the gaze is crucial, because the prohibition against woman seeing and being seen is at the heart of Maghrebian patriarchy, an ideological system in which the master’s eye alone exists; women challenge the patriarchal system by appropriating the gaze for themselves” (Mortimer). Isma takes back the gaze, and she allows Hajila to do the same. The two are complicit in this act. Isma literally hands Hajila the keys to the street.

In the end, however, Hajila and Isma switch roles and redefine each role in the process. Whereas Scheherazade is saved through motherhood, both Isma and Hajila’s releases from their prisons are predicated on their choices to pursue or not to pursue maternity. Isma closes her story

by regaining Meriem and returning to her village to take on the veil and her family. Yet, this move reads like Plato returning to the Cave. Only in embracing the strength of Scheherazade and her resistance, in understanding the struggle, can Isma hope to be a true sister to others who dare to break their chains. Hajila, however, takes a route Isma does not expect but is not surprised to see. When Hajila discovers her pregnancy, Isma attempts to give her options. She hands Hajila a key to the house and tells her: "It's up to you to decide whether you keep the child you're carrying, or whether to get rid of it" (153). When Hajila throws herself in front of a car at the novel's close, Isma imagines that "you will lose the foetus, which is already dead in your heart; and that you will live, with your yoke lightened, freed from your shackles" (159). Scheherazade removes the threat of death through her motherhood, and Hajila saves herself through a manufactured abortion. She walks into the road with her eyes open. She, Isma imagines, will escape the Man.

At the end of *Arabian Nights*, we learn that "each king ruled a day in turn, and they lived in harmony with each other, while the two sisters continued living harmoniously as well in love of Allah" (582-83). The Man in *Sister to Scheherazade* has no brother in which to share his power, but his wives, however different their worlds and views of the feminine, do ultimately "live harmoniously" with each other. Both represent the complicated nature of the liberated Algerian female. The struggle is not over and it is doubtful perhaps that an easy solution ever can present itself, yet in Scheherazade and Dinarzade, in the dead sultanas and the djinni's consort still somewhere in her chains, the Ismas and Hajilas of the modern world can look for role models. The fight to live through another day continues, but the battle ground must move from one between Man and his women to women united against the patriarchy: "O, my sister, I who thought to wake you, I'm afraid. I'm afraid for all women, not just we two or three, Isma, Hajila,

Meriem, but all women—barring midwives, barring mothers standing guard and those carrion-beetle-matriarchs, I fear lest we all find ourselves in chains again” (160). Only in combining forces, in taking away those who “stand guard,” only in embracing one another, can women hope to see the dawn.

Djebar, then, positions Scheherazade and Dinarzade as a means of uniting women and reconceptualizing their struggle. *Arabian Nights* is, for her, a source of potential empowerment, and its retelling a useful means of clarifying what it means to be a woman in her complex cultural context. Isma and Hajila are successful in their narratives in that both achieve liberation from the Man: Isma through forsaking her enslaving passions and Hajila through escaping the harem. Both arguably end the novel in a better place than they were when they started. Djebar’s cautious anticipation of a strong female alliance predicated on sisterhood to fight patriarchal injustices is veiled in the very real fear of future oppression, but the novel’s call to action and solidarity rings true. *A Sister to Scheherazade* is a moving story that holds out the hope for a better future.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood takes a very different approach to the retelling of her myth. Hers is a story that opens and closes with dead characters drifting through an aimless afterlife. Atwood’s Penelope, rather than being a locus point for remedying the cultural wounds or redeeming the ideal feminine, becomes a symbol for women complicit in the crimes of men. *The Penelopiad* weaves a haunting portrait of a woman crippled by her guilt, a woman who has failed to respond to calls for sisterhood. If Djebar’s Isma and Hajila find harmony with each other and their newly liberated roles, Penelope finds herself forever clashing with her twelve murdered maids and remains uncomfortable with the part she has been assigned to play in her own narrative. Djebar reclaims Scheherazade as a model to allow Hajila and Isma to achieve

sisterhood, but Atwood will forfeit Penelope as an idol to allow the disloyal maids of *The Odyssey* to attain long-awaited justice.

CHAPTER 2:

The Failure of Sisterly Solidarity:

The Penelopiad and Margaret Atwood's Radical Deconstruction of *The Odyssey*

If Djebbar tries to reconcile the heroism of Scheherazade in the original tales with the complications inherent in her success, Margaret Atwood is content to demolish the myth of Penelope and leave behind only the ghosts of wronged women trampled in her wake. In *The Penelopiad* (2005) Atwood problematizes the concept of sisterhood while even questioning the potential for its existence in a world wherein surfaces have replaced substance. Atwood's Penelope is lonely and isolated, wandering through the world of the dead without any companion or ally, uncomfortable with her own "edifying legend" (2). She competes endlessly in her own mind with the image of Helen, her cousin and rival. Her connection to her husband is based on lies told to him and to herself. She has sunk so far into cynicism that she has no wish to be reborn, convinced that her future life might be worse than her past (188). The careful optimism of *A Sister to Scheherazade* is replaced with a bleak landscape dominated by superficial competition and secrecy. Far from being an inspiring myth about female ingenuity within the confines of a strict gender role, then, for Atwood, Penelope becomes a woman complicit in Man's desire to eradicate those he deems unworthy of the Eternal Feminine.

Homer's *Odyssey* opens a decade after the fall of Troy. A series of misadventures have prevented the poem's central figure, Odysseus, from returning home to Ithaca. On one of these adventures, Odysseus is allowed to speak with the shades of dead heroes and has a conversation with the leader of the Greek army against Troy, Agamemnon, who returned home only to be

murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover. Agamemnon warns Odysseus to be suspicious of women and fears that it is impossible for women to be faithful to men. When the narrative opens, Odysseus is a prisoner of the goddess Calypso, who keeps him as her consort. When Athena, who is Odysseus's patron goddess, insists Calypso release him, he finally makes his way back to Ithaca after briefly telling the tales of his travels to the Phaeacians.

In Odysseus's absence, a slew of suitors have arrived at his home to court his wife Penelope. He is presumed dead, and his wife is therefore available. She, however, does not wish to remarry. She keeps the suitors at bay through a series of tricks, the most notable being her weaving of the shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. In this act of cunning, Penelope weaves in the day and then undoes her stitches in the night. The suitors have recently discovered her trickery, however, and have become more belligerent in their demands she choose a new husband. As they wait for her to do so, they consume the wealth of Odysseus's household, a particular concern for Penelope's teenage son Telemachus, who feels powerless to stop them.

Telemachus sets out to discover whether his father is still alive, journeying to visit the Greek captain Menelaus who is husband to a restored Helen, the woman whose disloyalty began the Trojan War. The royal couple welcomes Telemachus but knows nothing about his father's whereabouts. Meanwhile, on Ithaca, the suitors plot to kill Telemachus when he returns. While the prince manages to escape, Penelope worries the suitors may succeed in harming him.

When Odysseus finally arrives on Ithaca, he conceals his identity from everyone except for Telemachus and some of his most trusted servants. He observes the suitors as well as some of Penelope's maids who have become their lovers. Mistaking him for a beggar, both suitors and maids mistreat him. Odysseus then meets with Penelope, who may or may not recognize him, and she confesses she cannot hold off the suitors any longer and plans to propose a contest to

determine who she will marry. During this meeting, Odysseus's nurse Eurycleia recognizes him while bathing his feet and is taken into his confidence.

Penelope proposes the contest of the bow the next day, promising to marry any man who can string Odysseus's bow and shoot an arrow through ten targets. None of the suitors manage this, however, and Odysseus in his beggar disguise ends up succeeding before immediately using the bow to begin slaughtering the suitors. He is joined by Telemachus and his loyal servants (the women, including Penelope, have been dismissed to their quarters before the carnage begins). After the suitors die, Odysseus asks his nurse Eurycleia to point out which of Penelope's maids have been disloyal. Telemachus then hangs the twelve maids who slept with the suitors. Odysseus finally meets with Penelope out of disguise, but she claims to still be unsure of his identity. When he grows frustrated with her skepticism, she proposes that Eurycleia make up their marriage bed and move it to the hall so Odysseus can sleep. He becomes enraged, reminding her that their bed is literally carved from a tree and hence immovable. Penelope then embraces him and declares he has passed her test of the bed and proved his identity. The couple retreats to the bed in question and renews their relationship with love-making and storytelling.

Penelope's cunning intelligence, her fidelity, and her success in her own story make her a prime candidate for writers interested in reconstructing myth. Margaret Atwood, however, takes an unexpected approach to her version of *The Odyssey*. *The Penelopiad* initially arose not from its titular character, but rather from Atwood's fascination with Penelope's twelve murdered maids: "I've always been haunted by the hanged maids" she tells readers in her introduction, "and, in *The Penelopiad*, so is Penelope herself" (xv). Her text brings the twelve girls who slept with the suitors to center stage. Her goal in her retelling is to bring visibility and justice to these forgotten women as much as it is to give voice to Penelope.

Through transforming the relationship between Penelope and the maids into the central and most important alliance in her novel, Atwood seeks to interrogate the responsibility of powerful woman to the comparatively powerless and to question the silence surrounding violence men perpetrate against women. Using Homer's *Odyssey* as the contentious foundation for a story about failed sisterhood, Atwood delineates the limitations of forgiveness and the dangers of alliances with men for women who wish to challenge punitive patriarchy.

I

Like *Arabian Nights*, Homer's *Odyssey* (circa 800 BC) can be read as one man's reconciliation with Woman and in particular one man's realization and acceptance that a woman can in fact be faithful to him. This is particularly true if we read *The Odyssey* as a continuation of Homer's *Iliad* (circa 762 B.C.).

Whereas the conflict in *The Iliad* comes about through a rupture between a man and a woman (Helen's abandonment of her husband Menelaus), *The Odyssey* ends with a reunion between a man and a woman (Odysseus's return to Penelope). Penelope's proof of fidelity redeems Helen's infidelity just as Scheherazade's proof of fidelity redeems the sultana's infidelity. Even setting aside Homer's companion poem, *The Odyssey* is deeply concerned with issues of loyalty between men and gods, between parents and children, between masters and servants, and, most importantly, between husbands and wives. In *Arabian Nights*, infidelity leads to female destruction, but in *The Odyssey* infidelity leads to male destruction, particularly in its twin tales of Helen and Clytemnestra: "Myriads/ died by Helen's fault, and Clytemnestra/ plotted

against you [Agamemnon] half the world away” (XI.510-12).⁷ Even though Helen has been restored to Menelaus and Clytemnestra awaits foretold death for murdering her husband upon his return from Troy, neither woman has been punished for her choices at the time of Odysseus’s journey home--Helen never receives retribution for her choices-- and the cost of their betrayals haunt the text. This haunting is true literally; the shades of the fallen heroes appear to Odysseus on his voyage and function as a chorus after his triumph over the suitors.

The threat to the eternal feminine in Homer’s text is looming for the hero rather than accomplished. It is not Odysseus but Agamemnon who decides all women are unfaithful rather than simply excluding “unworthy” females from the definition of “good” women. When Odysseus meets with the shade of the Greek captain, Agamemnon warns him to go “in secret to your island; give no warning” to avoid possible destruction at Penelope’s hands (XI.534). Because his wife Clytemnestra betrayed him, Agamemnon posits that no woman can be trusted: “But that woman [Clytemnestra]...defiled herself/ and all of her sex, all women yet to come, / even those few who may be virtuous” (XI.501-504). Odysseus recognizes in turn that Zeus “vented his hatred on the sons of Atreus” through “the intrigues of women, even from the start” (XI.507-509). Odysseus himself has not experienced betrayal, but the world around him is trying to redefine Woman as a creature who inevitably will betray and will destroy men through that betrayal. The underlying question throughout the text, then, is not whether or not Odysseus will come home, but whether or not Penelope will still be his faithful wife when he does.

The Odyssey functions as *Arabian Nights* before Shahryār makes his decision to murder his virgin brides. It is a story on the brink of tragedy, and, while Penelope might not shield other women as directly as Scheherazade does, her conduct determines how the world at large views

⁷ I will be using Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* throughout this thesis unless otherwise noted.

and responds to Woman. Penelope's loyalty to Odysseus is a refutation of Agamemnon's worldview that "the day of faithful wives is gone forever" (XI.535). She, like Scheherazade, is tasked with bringing Man back into proper relations with Woman, allowing for the bonds of trust to be re-inscribed after the actions of a few have torn them asunder.

Penelope differs from Scheherazade in that her goals throughout her story are self-interested. She is not sacrificing herself for anyone; to the contrary, her actions reveal the lengths to which she goes to avoid putting herself into Scheherazade's position. She wishes to bed only Odysseus, professing "my lord, my lion heart, gone, long ago—/ the bravest man, and best, of the Danaans" (IV.867-8). While Penelope's desires coincidentally line up with the necessary actions for preserving and restoring the gender script that Helen and Clytemnestra jointly overturn, she refuses to marry the suitors because they "are here to court me, against my wish" (XIX.157-8). She uses every bit of power available to her to ensure that she remains, as Agamemnon puts it, "mistress of her own heart" (XXIV.220). The poem does not frame this selfishness as negative—Penelope wants what is correct and hence is a moral pillar in Grecian society.

If men in *Arabian Nights* (embodied by Shahryār) hold the power of choice, women in *The Odyssey* control and dominate their world. Some of these figures are immortals, and therefore have different gender scripts that anticipate their power. It is a goddess, Athena, who puts the entire story into motion in petitioning for Odysseus's release from Calypso and sending Telemachus on his quest. Both Calypso and Circe have held Odysseus in near slavery, keeping him a prisoner to their desires and whims. While engaging with these divine female figures, Odysseus is put into the position of the djinni's consort, forced to submit to their sexual attentions to survive. While these three female entities commanding Odysseus have the

expectation of power as immortals, female control also extends to mortal women who directly or indirectly rule nearly every kingdom presented in the text. When Odysseus journeys to the Phaeacians, he must petition the queen Arete rather than her husband for assistance journeying home (VI. 324-334). When Telemachus journeys to Menelaus's home, Helen directs the action of the household and sets the tone of the scenes she is in, often "demand[ing]" her husband obey her (IV.148). On Ithaca, of course, absent of any lord to command her, Penelope has sole dominion over her household. The queens in the text, like the goddesses, retain tremendous power over mortal men.

In contrast, men are unexpectedly passive in Homer's text. Odysseus, Telemachus, and the suitors are all in stasis, waiting for a woman—goddess or mortal—to force them back into motion. The women and their choices propel the plot forward whenever the men stagnate. For instance, it is Penelope who proposes the contest of the bow which begins the story's climatic fight and determines the fates of the suitors as well as Odysseus. After the slaughter of the suitors, when trying to decide which maids are loyal and disloyal to the household, Odysseus asks another woman, his nurse Eurycleia, to determine what to do next: "Your part is now to tell me of the women,/ those who dishonored me, and the innocent" (XXII.467-468). It is only when she points out the twelve guilty girls that Odysseus and Telemachus butcher them. Men may be the doers in *The Odyssey*, but women are almost always the deciders.

Within this collection of deciding women, Penelope occupies a curious position of power and powerlessness. She does not face literal death like Scheherazade so much as metaphorical death; should she fail to fend off the suitors, she will be forced into a new marriage and her identity as Odysseus's wife will be destroyed. Whereas Scheherazade's choice to marry the sultan sets into motion her struggle, Penelope's choice of whom to marry is one she intentionally

tries to delay. There is always a very real threat that sooner or later her suitors will forcefully take that choice away from her. The suitors warn Telemachus outright that his mother “may rely too long on Athena’s gifts” referring to her clever tricks she has used to deceive them (II.125), and it is clear that the situation in Ithaca is at a breaking point by the time Odysseus arrives home.

Despite the suitors’ apparent power over Penelope in terms of numbers and strength, the hordes of men eating Penelope out of house and home choose to respect her role as one who decides. Unwilling to fight each other for Penelope as others had and have contended for Helen during the Trojan War, and unwilling to negotiate with Penelope’s son or her father, the suitors are forced to accede to her wishes. Telemachus points out that the suitors hand Penelope this authority because they “have no stomach for an introduction/ to Icarius, her father across the sea; / he would require a wedding gift, and give her / to someone who found favor in her eyes” (II.55-58). The proper course of action places Penelope as property of her husband, but, as Odysseus is presumed dead, she then reverts to being property of her father. The suitors are violating this custom, and, ironically, granting Penelope sole choice to “take an Achaean to her liking” (II.136).

Penelope’s power of choice situates her outside of male control and undermines that control. Her unique position arises from the uncertainty of Odysseus’s whereabouts. Because Penelope cannot mourn for her husband—she does not know that he is dead—she is still defined as his wife, hence her father has no power over her. Because her husband has been missing for twenty years and is presumed dead, however, Odysseus has no way of exercising power over her either. Usually this would be resolved through a son taking on the position of father/husband, a solution the suitors point out to Telemachus: “Dismiss your mother from the house, or make her

marry / the man her father names and she prefers” (II.121-122). Telemachus, however, fears both his grandfather and “hell’s furies” should he try to claim his right to banish his own mother (II.144). Hence, Penelope moves through the text without any male authority to command her obedience.

The threat of Penelope’s unexpected power is twofold. First, her decision not to choose a new partner is eating away at her son’s property, and, as the text goes on, threatens his life. The suitors taunt Telemachus with how much his mother acts against his self-interest: “She makes a name for herself, /but you [Telemachus] can feel the loss it means for you” (II.133-34). From Penelope’s perspective, the suitors are asking her to make a choice between her role as a mother and her role as a wife. Richard Heitman comments on this internal conflict, arguing that Penelope ultimately resolves her debate through recognizing that protecting her son (and the House of Odysseus by extension) is the *only* way of honoring her marriage. Hence the ultimate act of loyalty to Odysseus, he argues, becomes her willingness to marry another for the sake of Telemachus. We will return to this particular decision below.

Second, Penelope’s power exposes the strict boxes women occupy as merely roles individual acting agents choose to play. Mark Buchan engages with Penelope’s strange position by suggesting she is asked to straddle two specific roles in the text: the virgin and the wife, or, to use the Grecian divide “the virgin maiden and the gyne”:

For Odysseus, she appears to be a faithful wife and is treated as if she was an idealized gyne—like Arete. For the suitors, she appears as a virgin maiden, who teases by promising—yet only promising—marriage; she is treated as if she was a beautiful, alluring virgin—like Nausicaa. Because Penelope embodies both Arete and Nausicaa, complexities arise; the passage from virgin to gyne is meant to be a natural and

progressive one. Young girls grow up to become what they naturally should be, wives.

Marriage resolves the uncertainty implied in the moment of transition. Penelope undermines this transition. But she does this not simply by lingering on the point of indeterminacy when she is not fully either; rather, she is emphatically both. She appears as virgin and gyne to different people at the same time, and she thus clarifies that these are not natural states of being but roles that can be played out, masks to be worn (214).

While Buchan is interested specifically in how Penelope deconstructs these two roles through her embodiment of both, I would further suggest that it is this very deconstruction which hands Penelope her power in the text. Men cannot define Penelope, they cannot categorize and place her, or, if they attempt to do so, their placement is revealed to be subjective. Penelope manages to make visible what Butler will spell out centuries after her. She occupies multiple roles, and her ability to be both wife and virgin, married and widowed, daughter and mother, puts her beyond the rules and strictures of men. She has to make a choice for the suitors because there is no man who appropriately can make the choice for her. Her position as a deciding being is recognized because she has stepped outside of the feminine script through straddling all of the roles available to her.

Importantly, Penelope does not occupy only female roles. With Odysseus absent, Telemachus too young to rule, and Odysseus's father Laertes self-exiled in his grief, Penelope is presumably left to manage the entire household on her own. Telemachus eventually takes on his role as male leader of the household during the contest of the bow, and he clearly delineates Penelope's province from what would be Odysseus/Telemachus/Laertes's expected role. He claims he alone can decide who can and cannot string his father's bow because "no man here/ has more authority than I do...no one stops me if I choose to give these weapons outright to my

guest. /Return to your own hall. Tend your spindle. / Tend your loom. Direct your maids at work.
/This question of the bow will be for men to settle, / most of all for me. I am master here”
(XXI.389-97). Penelope’s job, then, is in her own hall “with all of her women” (XXI.401) where she can weave and control women’s work. Telemachus’s need to take back his authority from his mother shows how far she has strayed from this role and how far she has ventured into questions appropriately “for men to settle.”

It is perhaps this lack of clarity as to Penelope’s position that most threatens the possibility of permanent rupture between man and woman. If Man does not know which role Woman plays for him, then how may he know her at all? The suitors address this through ignoring Penelope’s complex status in favor of their wish for her as an available “virgin.” For them her artificially constructed self is enough to satisfy. Telemachus positions her as mother and then tries to position himself as her master, but he makes no further attempt to understand her. Odysseus, however, I would argue against Buchan, does not manage to see Penelope solely within the crafted role of idealized gyne so very easily. His doubt regarding Penelope’s role stems from and offers proof of his intimate connection to and knowledge of Penelope beyond her gendered roles, just as her doubt of him ends up serving the same end.

Michelle Zerba reads *The Odyssey* as a text deeply concerned with knowledge and the value of skepticism. She argues that Penelope and Odysseus are linked in being the most skeptical characters in the text. Penelope’s skepticism is most acute because she is the character most kept in the dark, but both she and Odysseus are constantly testing the limits of their own knowledge. While I do not fully endorse Zerba’s reading—it asks us to see Penelope as skeptical to a point of absurdity in the moments leading up to the bed test—I do find her notion of trust and healthy skepticism to be invaluable in understanding how Penelope and Odysseus operate.

By extension, her reading also reveals where the relationship between the sexes currently stands. Husband and wife are cautious and test the other's intentions partially because they both see the theatricality of roles, even supposedly stable roles such as "woman" or "man." As the most aware actors on the stage, they recognize the fragility of relational identity and therefore seek some deeper self buried under the roles.

Like Scheherazade, Homer's Penelope is not lionized because of her beauty or for traditionally feminine traits. Rather, it is her resourcefulness that brings her particular notice. Just as her clever husband outwits the Trojans through the trick of the horse (VII.492-3) so she outwits the suitors through the trick of the weaving (II.100-118). Her refusal to give into the licentious demands of the suitors who plague her household is aided through her mental prowess and clever traps. The suitors see Penelope as "incomparably cunning" (II.95) and capable of great "trickery" (II.100). In fact, they proclaim that "wits like Penelope's never were before" (II.129) and draw attention to her "talent in handicraft and... clever mind" (II.126). They complain about Penelope flirting with them and "holding out hope to all" while she privately plans on marrying none of them (II.91). Despite this, however, all these men still manage to believe her trick of the weaving for three years, still believe she will marry one of them, and still trust her when she proposes the contest of the bow. She is arguably the most versatile actor in the cast, as those around her *know* she is acting a part but still choose to perceive her as genuine.

Only Odysseus outright interprets Penelope as an actress, noting "her sweet tones charming gifts out of the suitors/ with talk of marriage, though she intended none" (XVIII. 350-51). Penelope's talents, her ability to craft deceptions and to play parts, all serve to link her with her equally wily husband even as they keep him from fully trusting her. The two are allies; both concurrently pursue the same goals throughout the text. They both want to return to their

marriage bed and both want Telemachus safe. Because of the bad faith between men and women crafted in the wake of Helen's betrayal, however, they are unknowing allies, kept separate from each other through distance and then through a reasonable distrust in a world wherein gods wear human faces, beggars are kings, and middle-aged married mothers are mistaken for blushing young virgins. Both husband and wife profoundly doubt almost everyone else on stage with them, including each other. Odysseus takes Agamemnon's advice insofar as he arrives on Ithaca without informing his wife. He later instructs his son to trust no one, not "even Penelope" with the secret of his return (XVI.362). He believes this secrecy necessary for "you [Telemachus] and I alone must learn how far/ the women are corrupted" (XVI. 363). Again, Odysseus does not exempt Penelope from this inspection. He has not been satisfied that she is as she appears to be: the faithful wife.

Penelope's greatest strengths, the strategy and cunning that have allowed her to remain loyal, are the very traits which ironically put her beyond Odysseus's ability to trust. Her husband's uncertainty over her fidelity coalesces most strongly in how he and Telemachus treat Penelope's maids. In Fitzgerald's translation of *The Odyssey*, the maids are variously described as "the suitors' harlots," and "sluts" (XXII. 483, 516). Rouse translates the descriptions of the maids as "bold" girls, "bitch[es]", "wench[es]", and "shameless huzzies" (238, 233, 280). The most viciously expressed anger between people of opposite sexes in the poem comes when Odysseus confronts the maids before his visit to Penelope. The conversation ends in one maid threatening to "give you a good knocking about the ears/ to send you out bloody," and Odysseus responding with a threat to "cut your arms and legs off" (XVIII.414-15; 420). Odysseus and Telemachus react to the maids with sheer disgust, and the maids treat them to the same. This mutual violent language is the only time we have acknowledgement of the chasm which has

formed between men and women through the actions of Helen and her peers. The anger also, I will argue, indirectly reflects on Odysseus's uncertainty regarding Penelope's character.

The anger and uncertainty both Odysseus and Telemachus map onto the maids inevitably leads to their destruction. The poem allows for and condones a man's right to punish disloyal women, particularly those who, unlike Helen, do not have wealth or god-like beauty to shield them, a point Atwood will bring to the foreground of her retelling. Odysseus asks Eurycleia, his old nurse and ally, to judge which maids have misbehaved. She distinguishes the good from the bad at his behest, but she does not determine what happens to them; Odysseus and Telemachus do. Various characters warn the maids that their choices will lead to their deaths—perhaps most notably Penelope, who tells Melantho that her “shameless” ways “will cost your life” (XIX. 110, 112)—suggesting this is an expected return for their unfaithful behavior. The brutality of the maids' deaths denotes more passion than ritual. Odysseus and Telemachus force the maids to clean up the bodies of their dead lovers: “Here came the women in a bunch, all wailing, / soft tears on their cheeks. They fell to the work / to lug the corpses out into the courtyard... In fear / these women bore the cold weight of the dead... Telemachus ... made/ the women carry out all blood and mire” (XXII 498-508). That the maids suffer is important; that Odysseus “stood over them” to increase that fear is necessary (XXII.503). Each maid ultimately must “perish... most piteously” hung in the courtyard (XXII.525).

Seeing the twelve hung maids as merely female analogs for the suitors is problematic; the suitors are murdered as an act of vengeance, but their eradication is also an act of sheer preservation. We know that if Odysseus reveals himself, the suitors will inevitably kill him and Telemachus. The maids, however, present no threat of literal destruction to Odysseus. Their deaths are punitive—addressing a threat of the destruction of image rather than destruction of

substance. Killing them is not necessary for survival. When father and son plot out their revenge against the suitors, Telemachus marks explicitly the difference between danger and disgrace: “As for the maids I say, Yes: make distinction / between good girls and those who shame your house” (XVI.378). The suitors must die because they have acted improperly but also because the alternative is their victory. The maids must die because they have brought shame upon the household, and the anger that Odysseus and Telemachus feel for them is seemingly disproportionate to their crimes.

The poem suggests this anger is linked to the maids’ intimate connection to Penelope. In fact, Homer goes out of his way to remind us that the maids have not betrayed merely Odysseus, but rather Penelope herself. In his strong-worded confrontation with the maids, Odysseus suggests the maids return “to the women’s chambers, to your queen. / Attend her, make the distaff whirl, divert her, / stay in her room, comb wool for her” (XVII.387-389). They, however, refuse his request:

But the women giggled,
glancing back and forth—laughed in his face;
and one smooth girl, Melantho, spoke to him
most impudently. She was Dolios’ daughter,
taken as a ward in childhood by Penelope
who gave her playthings to her heart’s content
and raised her as her own. Yet the girl felt
nothing for her mistress, no compunction (XVIII. 385-402)

The fault of Melantho is not only that she has betrayed the household, not only that she has engaged in sex outside of sanctioned marriage, but also that she has failed in her daughter’s duty

to Penelope. As a beloved ward and representation of her mistress, her decision to sleep with one of the suitors is a decision to forsake her mistress/mother. It is this betrayal, one between women, that Homer highlights rather than Melantho's betrayal of the male household. Likewise, the first time the maids are mentioned is in reference to one's revelation of Penelope's secret of the weaving. When Telemachus explains how he intends to kill the maids, he reasons "I would not give the clean death of a beast/ to trulls who made a mockery of my mother" (XXII.514-15). His anger at the maids is on behalf of his mother. The association between the actions of the maids and Penelope's shame is clearly drawn. Perhaps the strength of Telemachus's disgust comes not because the maids have shamed his mother, but because the maids reveal what Penelope could freely choose to become. They become for Telemachus and Odysseus what Clytemnestra has become for Agamemnon: evidence of the potential (and perhaps inevitable) betrayal men face at women's hands.

Laurel Fulkerson (and Atwood in her retelling) argues that the larger issue at stake with the maids is Penelope's honor and the question of female fidelity as a whole. Because the "female slaves...[were] trained by your lady [Penelope]...in service...and taught to be submissive" they are her responsibility and her creation (XXII. 472-5). They also function as alternative paths for Penelope; they are sleeping with the suitors brazenly, whereas she has chosen to refuse such possibilities. Fulkerson reads the maids as extensions of Penelope herself who ultimately must bear the punishment required for normal gender roles to be reestablished. They are the "stand-ins for all the unfaithful or potentially unfaithful women of the poem" (346-7). The maids bear the punishment necessary to clear away the suspicion hanging over Penelope.

These "scapegoats" for Penelope, then, allow Odysseus to move beyond his doubts over his wife's fidelity: "Once we realize that Penelope's faithfulness is displaced onto her serving

women (some of whom are loyal and some not), we can see the issue of chastity as preemptively closed to discussion by the hanging of the unfaithful servants...With the maids' death, the issue of loyalty raised by Penelope abruptly ends" (Fulkerson, 344-5). With the maids punished and clearly delineated as disloyal, Odysseus and Telemachus assert their authority over female sexual experience within the household, and hence indirectly reaffirm their power over Penelope's body as well. In betraying Penelope, the maids ironically save her; they prove to Odysseus that she is separate from them and re-situate the divide between "good" and "bad" women. If the men convince themselves that the maids' deaths defend Penelope's honor, then Penelope has honor of which they "made a mockery." That Penelope and the disloyal maids are at odds serves to prove Penelope's loyalty. There are no sisterhoods in *The Odyssey*. The only visible maids are those who have transgressed, and these maids and Penelope are not on the same side and do not pursue the same goals. That they once did serves only to highlight the maids' failures and cement Penelope's triumph over Odysseus's doubts. Atwood will choose to subvert this relationship and question it in her retelling.

Even as Odysseus is initially suspicious of his wife, so is she suspicious of him. It is not clear precisely when Penelope knows or suspects that the stranger in her hall is Odysseus, cases can and have been made for her recognizing him during their conversation in Book XIX or for being completely unaware of his identity until after the test of the bed in Book XXIII.⁸ John Vlahos's argument is persuasive, and it seems likely that Penelope at least has a strong suspicion

⁸ The debate over early recognition is particularly contentious in criticism on Homer's *Odyssey* as a whole and especially in readings of Penelope. Cases for early recognition (during the first meeting between Penelope and Odysseus in Book XIX) have been best articulated by Philip Harsh, John Vlahos, and Robert Fitzgerald. Heitman and Bruce Loudon argue eloquently that Penelope is unaware of her husband's identity until after the test of the bow. Others suggest that Penelope is uncertain or recognizes Odysseus unconsciously. Norman Austin and Naoko Yagamata offer two variations of this position.

that the beggar man she speaks with in Book XIX is in fact her husband, hence leading to her proposal of the test of the bow.

Regardless of her recognition or lack thereof, however, Penelope's proposal of the test of the bow to decide who will marry her suggests a shift in how the queen of Ithaca approaches her situation. Heitman's reading, in which Penelope does not know the beggar is Odysseus, allows her to make a strategic decision to protect her son and his property. Vlahos's reading suggests that Penelope hands the husband she recognizes the only means to successfully dispatch the suitors. Either way, she acts in this scene somewhat against her own interests; the contest of the bow places her power of choice into the hands of fate—or, reading her as a knowing agent, into the hands of Odysseus. It is a form of surrender: "I have no strength left to evade a marriage,/ cannot find any further way; my parents/ urge it upon me, and my son/ will not stand by while they eat up his property" (XIX.184-7). While straddling multiple roles is empowering for Penelope, it is also exhausting and the cost for her son is no longer acceptable. In pushing for the contest of the bow, she pushes for a clarity of identity over the ability to choose.

The contest of the bow firmly re-establishes Penelope as Odysseus's wife, at least in so far as the male characters in the text are concerned. The contest does *not*, however, fully re-establish Odysseus as Penelope's husband. While the extent of Penelope's distrust of Odysseus depends somewhat on when she knows Odysseus is Odysseus, when she is positive as to his identity is almost irrelevant in comparison to her instinctive desire to test whether that identity still positions him as her loyal husband. Even if she does recognize Odysseus, she does not trust that he is still able and willing to play the role which connects them together.

Norman Austin reads the test of the bed as proof of Penelope's deep knowledge of her husband and his emotional core: "Penelope's test prevails because she alone knows that nerve in

Odysseus which would, when touched, cry aloud its pain. Odysseus reacts to her test as if the ground had given way and he were once more lost in the surging sea. In greatest agitation he insists that he personally had anchored to the earth that chamber in which he would hide his secret self” (238). For Austin, Penelope forces Odysseus to confront his very sense of self because his true self is wrapped up in being Penelope’s partner. Penelope, even as she has handed over her role of decider, knows that she will receive it back again: she decides whether or not Odysseus is the man he claims to be: her husband. Penelope does not choose to recognize Odysseus until he has proven his knowledge of their secrets through the test of the bed. In proving himself, Odysseus also reveals the depth of his love for the bed and by extension, their marriage.

If Penelope is willing to re-enter into a more restrictive role, she expects the same from Odysseus. Fate hands her the man she always wanted, but Penelope requires further proof before surrendering the power granted to her through her ambiguous multiple roles: “I armed myself / long ago against the frauds of men, / imposters who might come—and all those many/ whose underhanded ways bring evil on” (XXIII. 242-245)! Penelope turns Agamemnon’s assessment of women back against men, suggesting that men bring evil to women through *their* fraudulent ways. She repositions the deceivers as men, highlighting the reciprocity of the broken trust between the sexes. Just as Penelope exposes the failure of predetermined roles to codify individual women, so too does her demand to test Odysseus expose the fragility of the masks *he* has chosen to wear. Each sees the other as a “strange woman” and a “strange man” who must prove him/herself *the* woman and *the* man for whom each waits (XXIII.187). Recognizing each other not as Strange Man and Strange Woman but rather as Odysseus and Penelope is deeply desired but also very difficult for both of them.

The royal couple's reunion is a surrender of the power of ambiguous identity. It strips away their roles and leaves behind only the individuals who played them. Odysseus only truly lets down his guard when he finally has "his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms" (XXIII.261-2). Likewise, Penelope turns "her gaze upon her husband, / her white arms round him pressed as though forever" (XXIII. 269-270). In a very real way, neither Penelope nor Odysseus know themselves until they recognize each other. They claim the other, their language possessive, reestablishing relational identity and linking together once more. They both lose their fluidity to each other, but their recognition also allows for the potential of joint power through a known alliance. As Austin contends in this moment of recognition, Odysseus can "surrender his mask, and so does Penelope" (238). In finding each other, they can yield the effort of theatricality to genuine authenticity.

The couple's ability to set aside suspicion and trust each other signals the ability for men and women to form healthy relationships in spite of broken trust. Whereas *Arabian Nights* provides no strong relationships between men and women (with arguably the exception of Scheherazade and her father), and the eventual marriage between Scheherazade and Shahryār is more functional than emotionally satisfying, *The Odyssey* centers around what is presented as a mutually loving marriage between like-minded individuals. Indeed, I would argue the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus is one of few male-female bonds in Homer that is presented as equal to any male-male bond. Penelope and Odysseus end their tale in bed together "mingled in love again/ and afterward lay reveling in stories" (XXIII.337-8). Their love-making is an act performed together—very different from Shahryār's coupling performed upon Scheherazade. Whereas Scheherazade must tell tales to survive, Penelope and Odysseus both are equal participants in the telling and receiving of tales. The summary of their storytelling episode

suggests that neither has secrets from the other. Odysseus ultimately does not take Agamemnon's advice to "indulge a woman never, / and never tell her all you know. Some things / a man may tell, some he should cover up" (XI.515-518). Instead, Odysseus rejects this view of women and chooses to confide the entirety of his story to his wife just as she confides the entirety of her story to him. Penelope's choice to ally with Odysseus allows her an equal footing with her husband, so long as she remains faithful to him and his worldview. Their renewed partnership brings the household back into proper balance.

The idea that women are necessary for a peaceful accord is echoed on a larger scale when Athena ends the conflict on Ithaca. The poem closes with the goddess brokering a peace between Odysseus and the other Ithacans, asking the men to "call off this battle now" (XIV. 608). Odysseus and the others "yielded to *her*" and set down their arms (XXIV.610, emphasis mine). The reconciliation between men and women allows for the end of the wars that came about through the rupture, even as it requires the survivors to "blot out the memory of sons and brothers slain" (XXIV.536-7). The women who were destroyed in the conflict have already been forgotten.

Recognizing the complexity of gendered relations in *The Odyssey* is not to deny the limitations of the restored accord between men and women. As with Scheherazade, Penelope's success is predicated on other women's failure. The alliance she shares with Odysseus implies and in some ways requires the demonization of the figures of Helen, Clytemnestra, and the unfaithful women of the household. Her worthiness exists because they are unworthy. When Agamemnon proclaims that Odysseus needs not worry about his wife, it is because Penelope "is too wise, / too clear-eyed, sees alternative too well" to make the same choices as Clytemnestra or Helen (XI.518-19). Their bad examples allow for her corrected course, allow her to be judged "a

valiant wife! /True to her husband's honor and her own, Penelope, Icarus's faithful daughter" (XXIV.218-220)! Penelope's final benediction, significantly delivered by Agamemnon, directly connects Penelope's value with her ability to uphold the reputation and honor of her husband and her father. She is "valiant" because she has reversed the choices of Helen and Clytemnestra and chosen to stand with her men.

Just as Scheherazade saves and attempts to honor Dinarzade, so Penelope makes an effort to help at least one of her sisters. She tries to reposition female fault as error rather than crime, questioning whether "Helen of Argos... would... have joined the stranger, lain with him, /if she had known her destiny" (XXIII.246-248)? She even attempts to displace such choices on the gods (250). In the end, however, her effort serves not to deconstruct the divide so much as to highlight it. She tries to clear others of blame, but, much like Scheherazade, she cannot rid the men she allies with of their need to divide good women from bad women along the lines of their sexual fidelity and adherence to prescribed roles. Penelope survives and thrives because she fulfills her role as a "good" woman well and manages to restore that status as one to which women can strive. While Odysseus may recognize her as an individual beyond her gender identity, this clearly does not move him to grant other women the same individuality.

II

In rewriting the tale of Penelope, Atwood inherits similar problems to Djebbar, but her task is distinct from the other writer's. Penelope in some ways is more difficult to approach than Scheherazade because of the multiple roles she straddles. She is as slippery if not more slippery

than her husband, refusing to be easily defined or pinned down. In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood takes Penelope's theatricality to the extreme, positing the dangers of masks without substance beneath. In acknowledging Penelope's agency, Atwood must also confront her choice to ally with Odysseus, which is, as we will see, a major problem for a retelling that seeks to privilege the experience of the twelve murdered maids. The Greek hero is not the equivalent of Shahryār; the sultan in *Arabian Nights* is an obstacle to survival and translates well into a villain in Djébar's retelling. Odysseus is not a threat for Penelope from her perspective; he is her goal, and, while reaching that goal does deprive her of certain powers, her alliance with him is still genuine and one formed of her own volition.

To bring *The Odyssey*'s victims and their struggle to the forefront of the tale, Atwood must dismantle the assumed heroism of Penelope presented in Homer's poem. Much of this deconstruction comes from Atwood's repositioning of the maids as Penelope's closest allies and first responsibility, resituating the betrayal from servants to their mistress. Atwood's task also requires deeply interrogating Penelope's role as a foil for Helen. Ultimately, however, giving the maids their due demands destabilizing and deromanticizing the connection between Odysseus and Penelope. Atwood aims to suggest that the ending of *The Odyssey* presents a false reunion. An alliance between men and women cannot and should not exist when men refuse to acknowledge the wrongs they have done to women. For Atwood, Odysseus's murder of the maids forever bars him from the reconciliation with Penelope that Homer offers.

The Penelopiad splits its narrative between Penelope and a chorus of murdered maids. Penelope tells her story from the Underworld where she has been since her death. She keeps up with the world of the living through the reports of those who have chosen reincarnation. We discover that her life is relatively boring, consisting mostly of wandering through fields of

asphodel, talking with Helen, and awaiting Odysseus's return from the land of the living.

Odysseus, alongside Telemachus, does not stay long in the Underworld, instead entering into the waters of Lethe to be reincarnated into new lives. Penelope does not want to be reborn, however.

Penelope details her life from her childhood onwards. She particularly focuses on her relationship with her cousin Helen, who has always teased and belittled her. She tells us about the contest Odysseus wins through cheating that allows him to marry her. She also details her pleasant wedding night. Falling in love with her husband and his stories, she is happy to leave her home and go to Ithaca. Once she arrives there, however, she finds herself in competition with Odysseus's controlling mother, who disapproves of her, and Odysseus's nurse Eurycleia, who sees her as rather useless. Penelope hopes her standing in the family will improve with the birth of Telemachus, but it does not.

When Odysseus leaves for the Trojan War, Penelope manages the estate in his absence. Her mother-in-law dies shortly after his departure leaving her solely in charge. She is rather good at housekeeping; Ithaca prospers under her rule. She becomes very friendly with her maids and listens eagerly for news of Odysseus. Eventually, the suitors arrive and begin to eat her out of house and home. In an attempt to contain the situation, Penelope asks her twelve favorite maids to spy on the suitors for her. The girls also help her weave and unweave the shroud for Laertes. Many of the maids are raped by the suitors, and several of them end up as their lovers voluntarily. The maids, however, faithfully report back to Penelope with any information they gather.

When Odysseus returns home, Penelope recognizes him, but he does not realize she does so. She hands him the contest of the bow as his best means of defeating the suitors. She sleeps through the slaughter and is only told afterwards by Eurycleia that the maids have been

murdered. Heart-broken, she meets Odysseus but does not dare show her sorrow for fear he will doubt her fidelity. She teases him with the test of the bed and they make love. Later, she mourns the maids in secret to avoid Odysseus's suspicion. Now, in the Underworld, every time Odysseus tries to stay with Penelope, the maids frighten him away. When she asks them to forgive her husband, they refuse.

In their counter-narrative, the maids offer commentary on Penelope's story, detailing their lives as poor servant girls. Their sections are often in the form of songs and skits. Penelope's chapters are always followed by the maid's voices, and often their account calls into question some aspect of the previous chapter.

Atwood begins the process of decoupling Penelope and Odysseus through a drastic rewrite of the source story. In *The Penelopiad*, the maids are Penelope's allies, bound to her in a secret sisterhood. Their bad behavior comes about because Penelope has "ordered them to behave rebelliously" (161). They act as Penelope's "eyes and ears among the Suitors," and they are her "helpers during the long nights of the shroud" (160). Her affection for them is intense, at least insofar as she reports that affection. She describes the maids as "my snow-white geese. My thrushes, my doves" (160). She even goes so far as to say "they were like my daughters" (181). Her actions betray greater ambiguity towards her servant-daughters than her words; she fails to protect them from Odysseus or to affirm the wrongs done to them after their deaths.

Atwood's focus on the maids allows her to dissect an issue present in Homer's tale but not commented on: class. Penelope already has power over the maids due to her superior age. It is her status as the queen of Ithaca, however, which creates the hierarchal relationship between them. Penelope is responsible for the maids as both mother and mistress, and she arguably fails in both roles.

Atwood points out that the treatment of the maids in *The Odyssey* is as much a function of their birth into what she characterizes as slavery as their gender. Atwood's Penelope draws attention to her own status as "an aristocrat" (4) and the privileges that come from being a woman of wealth. She believes that "people told me I was beautiful...because I was a princess, and shortly after that a queen" (21). The praise she receives is predicated on her position in the class hierarchy rather than on her own merit. The maids draw this connection directly when each dreams of what she would do "if I was a princess, with silver and gold" (51). The maids explain that they were "born to the wrong parents. Poor parents, slave parents" (13). The contrast between Penelope's childhood and the childhood the maids experience is sharp and harsh, a reminder that for children whose parents were "not demi-gods," the constrictions of gender roles are nearly insurmountable (14). The maids will never be the alluring virgins nor the idealized wives. They are not granted Penelope's freedom to explore different and defined roles. Instead they are deemed "dirty. Dirt was our concern...dirt was our fault. We were the dirty girls. If our owners or the sons of our owners or the sons of a visiting nobleman wanted to sleep with us, we could not refuse...All this happened to us when we were children" (14). Even though the maids are forbidden the feminine ideal through their position as slaves, men judge the girls by a standard to which they have no hope of adhering. For all the constrictions placed upon Penelope, Atwood reminds us that the nameless and forgotten women, the servants and the slaves, inevitably suffered fates which allowed for less freedom and agency than princesses.

In *The Odyssey*, it is unclear whether or not the maids initially consented to their relationships with the suitors. By the time Odysseus returns, they clearly have chosen to continue their affairs, and they function as active agents in the original text. This certainly does not preclude that their affairs started in a manner that did not allow them to give consent, but

whether or not they were raped tends to depend upon translation. Atwood, however, leaves no ambiguity in her text as to the maids' being forced into sex. Penelope laments that "several of the girls were unfortunately raped, others were seduced, or were hard pressed and decided that it was better to give in than to resist" (115). As she has ordered the girls to spy on the suitors, she knowingly sends them into danger. Her dismissal of these rapes on the grounds that "most maids got raped, sooner or later; a deplorable but common feature of palace life" (181) normalizes sexual assault and refuses to acknowledge the real horror of the maids. While Penelope notes that many of the maids "did fall in love with the men who had used them so badly" (117), this hardly excuses or corrects how the relationships began. Atwood suggests that, for a class of women who are property, consent is never fully possible. While maids may choose to "decide it was better to give in than resist," they cannot choose to refuse.

In the end, Penelope recognizes the maids' deaths as her fault, not because she fails to tell Odysseus that they are her allies, but rather because she fails to tell another woman. Odysseus's nurse Eurycleia denounces the maids because she is not in on the secret: "It was my fault! I hadn't told her of my scheme" (160). Penelope, who positions herself as a rival with the aggressively maternal Eurycleia for the affection and trust of both her husband and her son, chooses not to confide in her. This distrust and suspicion between women, bred from competition for the affection of men, destroys those who have the least protection, those who, without penises or wealth, have no defenders "in life" (183). The privilege of Penelope's class, even the privilege of Eurycleia's elevated status as substitute mother for Odysseus, allows them to escape from destruction when the maids cannot.

Atwood's repositioning of the maids as Penelope's allies does somewhat undercut her commentary on the unfairness of their fates. Instead of denouncing the murder of these girls, in

reframing the text, Atwood suggests the maids do not deserve to die because they were working for Penelope the entire time, rather than because what they had done did not deserve the punishment given. If the maids were secretly working for Penelope and were forced to submit to the suitors, Odysseus's mistake is simply ignorance; he accidentally kills allies. If the maids had in fact been exactly as they were portrayed in the source text, Atwood obliquely implies, they *would* deserve to hang. Atwood fails to address the true moral question—that execution is not an acceptable response to sexual promiscuity and disloyalty.

The text's preoccupation as to the "purity" of its female characters does not include merely the maids. Atwood continually questions Penelope's own fidelity throughout the text, suggesting that there is a real possibility that the heroine herself is hypocritical. Atwood takes Fulkerson's reading of the maids being punished to relieve the question of Penelope's fidelity to its literal extreme. The maids craft a version of events wherein Penelope is "tending [her] desire" (148) and the twelve maids "assisted [and] know that the Suitors [she] ha[s] not resisted. They "smuggled lovers in and out all night" (150). In order to save herself, then, Penelope asks Eurycleia to "point out those maids as feckless and disloyal" (150). While repositioning or questioning Penelope's loyalty is valid, in this context it serves merely to highlight proper versus improper behavior, ultimately reinforcing the male-centric narrative that women are defined through their fidelity or lack thereof.

Atwood's refusal to reframe the discussion, then, emphasizes the impossibility of escaping the male-crafted narratives placed on women. In Atwood's intertwined reality, the maids and Penelope are either pure or whores, loyal or disloyal. They are defined, as are all the female characters in her world, through men, through their bodies, and through the roles prescribed for them. The conception of a loyal whore is unrecognizable for Odysseus or for

Eurycleia. It is also incomprehensible for Penelope, who continues to position the maids as “the ones who’d been raped... The youngest. The most beautiful” (160). For her, the maids are victims rather than active agents in their own stories, and it is only because of their victimhood that Odysseus’s actions are wrong.

Lingering in the background of this discussion of the maid’s disobedience is the original transgressor: Helen. If, as Fulkerson suggests, the maids in *The Odyssey* function as stand-ins for the other unfaithful women of the poem and for Penelope’s possible missteps, then they are connected to and a reflection of Helen’s instigating betrayal. Helen, unlike the maids, is never punished, her superior beauty and her status as a daughter of Zeus protecting her from the harm vented instead on the serving girls. This lack of reprisal bothers Atwood’s Penelope to no end: “Helen was never punished, not one bit... You’d think Helen might have got a good whipping at the very least, after all the harm and suffering she caused to countless other people. But she didn’t” (22). In this anger Penelope not only reinforces her desire to uphold the divide between good and bad women, which positions Helen as a destroyer and the maids as a threat, but it also serves to introduce Penelope’s defense for her actions throughout the text: everything is Helen’s fault.

The sub-textual comparison between Helen and Penelope in *The Odyssey*—wherein Penelope becomes a redemptive and healing correction for Helen—manifests in a literal competition between the two women in *The Penelopiad*. Helen is Penelope’s cousin and her constant rival. Atwood, “who has repeatedly chosen to represent conflict between sisters and female friends in her earlier works... does not hesitate to imagine the animosity Penelope must have felt towards Helen” (Suzuki, 375). Penelope defines herself almost exclusively against Helen and Helen’s actions: “I was not a man-eater, I was not a Siren, I was not like cousin Helen

who loved to make conquests to show she could... I was a kind girl—kinder than Helen” (29). Jealousy over Helen’s physical beauty permeates Penelope’s narrative. Whereas she is aware of her own intelligence and the various traits for which Homer’s Penelope is remembered, these gifts pale for Atwood’s Penelope in face of her own plainness. She was “not deformed or ugly...[but] nothing special to look at. I was smart, though... That seems to be what I was known for: being smart. That, and my weaving, and my devotion to my husband, and my discretion” (21). Atwood’s Penelope notes that the traits for which Helen is remembered are more compelling than those for which she herself is remembered. She points specifically to all of the magicians who conjure Helen from the underworld. They summon Helen, Penelope says, because they would rather have “a woman who’d driven hundreds of men mad with lust and had caused a great city to go up in flames” over “a smart wife who’d been good at weaving and had never transgressed” (21). Penelope compares herself to Helen in every way, and, while she tells us she is the better person, she sees Helen as infinitely more admirable.

Penelope’s obsession with her cousin leads her to comment on and continuously rank Helen’s desirability and sexual escapades. Gabrielle Neethling argues that “Penelope’s own repressed desires and impulses are realized in Helen” (120). Certainly, Penelope’s competition with Helen extends into and dominates her relationship with Odysseus. It is not clear how much of Odysseus’s unrequited love for Helen exists inside Penelope’s head—our ability to trust her account is tentative at best—but Penelope wonders often why her husband was “still—and possibly always—thinking about Helen” (64). Throughout the text Penelope is constantly searching for her husband’s approval and specifically for Odysseus to see her as a better and more desirable woman than Helen:

I had such a clear picture in my mind—Odysseus returning, and me—with womanly modesty—revealing to him how well I had done at what was usually considered a man’s business. On his behalf, of course, always for him. How his face would shine with pleasure! How pleased he would be with me! ‘You’re worth a thousand Helens,’ he would say. Wouldn’t he (88-89)?

Even when Penelope does work “usually considered a man’s business,” she does it because of her role as “woman” and wife. Her actions do not break through the binary, rather they reposition her more firmly in her role. Whereas Homer’s Penelope defined herself almost in defiance of outsiders, Atwood’s version is subsumed in her hatred and jealousy of her cousin, envious to the point that she allows Helen to define and dictate her choices.

The toxic competition between Helen and Penelope frames Helen as “Penelope’s antagonist, even her nemesis” (Ingersoll 114). Earl G. Ingersoll suggests that this hostile relationship allows Penelope to frame her story as a “tragedy” over which she has no control. Certainly, Penelope announces the Trojan War with a chapter entitled “Helen Ruins My Life.” Homer’s Penelope is a woman beset, but she retains surprising power. She is the woman who can hold herself in check and test Odysseus, even as she longs to throw herself in his arms. She certainly weeps and sleeps a great deal,⁹ but she only abandons herself to fate when no other resources are available to her. Atwood suggests, however, that the real Penelope could only tolerate her own story and her betrayal of the maids if she could convince herself her story was one over which she exerted no control. If Homer’s Penelope makes excuses for Helen through the workings of the gods, Atwood’s Penelope makes excuses for herself through the machinations of Helen.

⁹ Atwood feels Penelope’s weeping is so prevalent in the original tale that it needs further explanation; she gives Penelope a Naiad mother, hence making her prone to crying (10).

Ingersoll argues “Atwood may in fact be allowing her own fascination with the Helen figure to contaminate Penelope's narrative... Penelope certainly comes close to allowing Helen to upstage her through her insistent villainizing of her cousin. Penelope's airing of her resentment eventually becomes embarrassingly self-revealing” (115-116). While I agree with Ingersoll's assessment that Helen functions to reveal Penelope's own shortcomings, I further argue that this belittling feels intentional on Atwood's part rather than incidental. In the source story, Penelope is selfish in so far as she pursues what it is she most wants, even long after her desires have ceased to be entirely feasible. This selfishness does not make her morally culpable; Penelope wants correct ideals and pursues them. Atwood, however, in questioning the “correctness” of Penelope's original position also questions her selfishness. Atwood's Penelope, as revealed through her interactions with Helen and the maids, has neither correct aims nor self-awareness. This Penelope is also an actress pursuing goals, but her greatest audience is not the suitors, Odysseus, or the world at large. She acts ultimately to fool herself.

Atwood's Penelope is not as self-aware as Djebbar's Isma nor is she as capable of seeing beyond the system as Isma and Hajila. While she identifies herself as “a stick used to beat other women with. Why couldn't they be as considerate, as trustworthy, as all-suffering as I had been” (2), she also spends most of the text comparing herself favorably to her cousin Helen. While this Penelope begins her story suggesting that she does not want others to follow in her example, the entirety of her narration is a guilty justification for her actions and why she took them. Though she positions herself as a mother figure for the maids, she fails not only to save them but even to sympathize with their plight. She has far less control of her narrative than Isma does hers; Penelope struggles to present herself to the audience as she wishes to be perceived while the chorus of maids undercuts, comments on, and revises her account of events at every turn.

Atwood chooses to write *The Penelopiad* as a straight retelling of *The Odyssey* rather than a new story which uses the myth as the centerpiece. This direct approach forces her to adhere more closely to the plot points of the original tale. Atwood, however, cleverly complicates the framing of the story not only through positioning Penelope as its primary narrator, but also through positioning her Penelope of Antiquity as the narrator in our modern times. Because Penelope literally tells her story from Hades, she has access to our culture as well as her own, allowing her to encompass many times, places, and ideas simultaneously. Atwood also complicates the narrative framing in refusing to allow Penelope full control her story. Unlike Isma, she cannot command our attention with the “I” and subjugate other characters with the “you.” Instead, Atwood approximates the modern experience—wherein confessions like Penelope’s are commented upon, re-uploaded, and re-interpreted by others— through an ancient theatrical convention: the chorus. The twelve maids form this chorus “burlesquing the main action” of Penelope’s narrative (198). Kafah Omari and co-writers position *The Penelopiad* as a representation of Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia. The authors argue that Penelope’s voice overlaid with the maids’ chorus as well as the various genres of the choruses (the maids perform songs, have their day in court, conduct an anthropology lecture, and more) allow for a complex conflation of antiquity and modernity. It also captures the sense of multiple voiced experiences.

Repositioning the tale through the joint narrative of Penelope and the maid chorus also allows Atwood to call into question what constitutes the “truth” of the story. Penelope and the maids often disagree in their accounts—Penelope in fact contradicts herself in numerous places. Many specific questions go unanswered because the truth rests with an individual unwilling to part with it. For instance, we never find out if one of the maids betrayed Penelope to the suitors, if Eurycleia intentionally chooses Penelope’s favorite maids as a form of revenge, or which of

the various versions of Odysseus's journey constitute reality. Penelope does not even ever confirm conclusively whether or not she was faithful to her husband. Atwood's Penelope begins her tale through questioning how much of Odysseus's "version of events was the true one" (2) and this question echoes until the final page. This subjectivity of truth in *The Penelopiad* replaces the certainty which Odysseus and Penelope find in the close of *The Odyssey*.

The inability to know Truth translates into an inability to know other people but also an inability to know oneself. In "Simulacra and Simulations," Jean Baudrillard contends that in the modern world the great secret is that nothing rests beyond the layers of simulation, images that once served to imperfectly reflect our world, then begin to obscure it, and eventually the image "masks the absence of a basic reality" (368). Being able to simulate a reality blurs the line between the real and the unreal: "Thus feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'. Since the simulator produces 'true' symptoms, is he or she ill or not" (367). Atwood ultimately suggests that Penelope might simulate a whole self, but this simulation masks her own deep lack of awareness. Because she is unable to reconcile her failure to protect her maids with how she wishes to perceive her story, she cannot arrive at any personal truth. In a way, there is no real Penelope in Atwood's text. Her narrative is so transparently artificial, her lies to herself so all-encompassing, and her need to construct herself in opposition to Helen so destructive, that she is left with only guilt and suspicion to replace any stable identity.

Atwood reminds us that in such a world, "women can be not only 'sisters' but each other's worst enemies" (Ingersoll, 118). Certainly, if Djebbar finds refuge in shared experience as a "woman," Atwood rejects the possibility of true female alliances within a patriarchal society.

The strictures and binaries of patriarchy—rules to which Atwood’s Penelope is bound and subscribes—serve to break down self and exclude understanding of others. Penelope cannot trust Eurycleia, cannot move beyond her jealousy of Helen, and she certainly cannot fulfil a sister’s role to the maids.

The inability to form healthy relationships, however, permeates to all characters in the text, ultimately breaking down the male-female alliance which *The Odyssey* works so hard to set up. If Homer’s Odysseus and Penelope reach a point of intimate understanding of each other that also allows them self-knowledge, Atwood’s couple always feels estranged. From the beginning, Penelope describes a broken marriage with her husband, and worse, a broken marriage that neither fully recognizes: “He was tricky and a liar, I just didn’t think he would play his tricks and try out his lies on me” (2). This Odysseus “was always so plausible” so much so that Penelope confesses “even I believed him, from time to time” (2). As a liar herself, Penelope finds it difficult to trust her lying husband. This is true in Homer’s story as well, but in Atwood’s account there is no reconciliation for the couple because there is nothing beyond the multiple roles each plays.

Atwood initially uses Penelope and Odysseus’s relationship to expose the theatricality of the patriarchal scripts. Their wedding night showcases the play-acting of forcefully inscribed gender roles: “the fiction was that the bride had been stolen, and the consummation of a marriage was supposed to be a sanctioned rape. It was supposed to be a conquest, a trampling of a foe, a mock killing. There was supposed to be blood” (44). What is significant about this wedding scene, however, is that, while Odysseus and Penelope “pretend” to follow the rules, Odysseus is not interested in actually carrying out any barbaric ritual. He promises “not to hurt you, or not very much” (44). Penelope in fact deeply enjoys her wedding night, which is replete in story-

telling, love-making, and bonding. Like Isma, she genuinely desires her husband, but, unlike Isma, this does not result in her surrender. It is only in retrospect that she begins to suspect Odysseus was never what he seemed: “So by the time morning came, Odysseus and I were indeed friends...Or to put it another way: I myself had developed friendly feelings towards him—more than that, loving and passionate ones—and he behaved as if he reciprocated them. Which is not quite the same thing” (48). Penelope recognizes that there is a difference between acting love and feeling it. Her more experienced husband is a master of manipulation, and she fears he has used his superior artifice to gain her genuine affection.

Odysseus and Penelope do not have an equal relationship in *The Penelopiad*. Odysseus’s “manner was that of an older person to a child” (57). Initially, however, Atwood frames Odysseus initially, unlike Djebbar’s Man, as a real person. His relationship with Penelope goes further than Isma’s with the Man, and the narrative suggests that his interest in Penelope goes beyond the sexual—though the threat of Helen, real or imagined, is certainly always present. By the end of the text, however, Penelope sees through Odysseus, sees his plots and disguises even while he does not know she sees them. The test of the bed transforms from a necessary recognition between husband and wife into a failed recognition. In Atwood’s version Penelope is “teasing” her husband even while he is unaware of the joke (171). Their reunion is marred through Penelope’s secrecy over the recent death of the maids. While they still tell each other stories and make love, the trust Homer’s couple finds does not exist for Atwood’s pairing: “The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It’s a wonder either of us believed a word the other said. But we did. Or so we told each other” (173). Their relationship is one predicated on lies and secrecy. While Homer’s Odysseus and Penelope are connected through their ability to play parts, for Atwood’s royal couple this skill set keeps

them separate and distant from each other. This lack of trust, as we will see, brings us full circle back to the maids, which create the split between our royal couple.

The only alliance which remains intact throughout the novel is arguably the alliance between the maids themselves. They stand together throughout the text, traveling in a pack both in life and in death. Their narrative is in third person plural, an unbroken “we.” The very strength of this sisterhood, however, reveals its tremendous price. The maids sacrifice their individuality to function as a chorus throughout the novel. Only one of the twelve maids is named (Melantho of the Pretty Cheeks, who is also the only named maid in *The Odyssey*), but her identity is given to her only in Penelope’s narrative. In the maids’ responses they “had one face/ one face the same” (195).

As ghosts, the maids cast themselves as “twelve accusations” following Odysseus around through all his reincarnations when he chooses to leave the Underworld for the world of the living (192). Atwood takes pains to draw a direct link between Odysseus and other hero-worshipped men who also, she implies, have their “trail of smoke, like a long tail, a tail made of girls, heavy as memory, light as air” (192). Until such time as the maids can be heard and acknowledged, they must haunt Odysseus: “It’s the maids. He sees them in the distance, heading our way. They make him nervous. They make him restless. They cause him pain. They make him want to be anywhere and anyone else” (189). The maids demand that the Furies “let him [Odysseus] never be at rest” (183)! They are determined for their story to finally be heard, no matter the cost.

If there is not peace for Odysseus, however, neither can there be rest or peace for Penelope. Atwood’s Penelope is left alone in the underworld begging her husband to stay with her. He, however, cannot, must continue to run away. Penelope believes he wants to stay: “He

does mean it. He really does. He wants to be with me. He weeps when he says it. But then some force tears us apart” (189). This force is, of course, the maids, who cannot leave Odysseus until he and the world at large can acknowledge the wrong he has done them. As in *The Odyssey*, then, Odysseus finds himself haunted. In Homer’s text Odysseus encounters the shade of Agamemnon, a man who believes a woman led him and other men to their destruction (XI.510-515). In Atwood’s version, the women Odysseus has destroyed follow him everywhere he goes.

Penelope tries to broker a peace between the maids and Odysseus, but she is no Athena and she has not the power in this version of the tale to bridge the divide between men and women. Her defense of her husband comes at the expense of others, transforming Penelope from the woman who allied with men, to the woman who betrayed other women. To ally with a man, Atwood suggests, is to become complicit in the crimes of patriarchy. As Penelope herself puts it, when she thinks of her husband: “I turned a blind eye. I kept my mouth shut, or, if I opened it, I sang his praises. I didn’t contradict, I didn’t ask awkward questions. I didn’t dig deep” (3). Her desire for “happy endings” prevents her from interrogating the cost of those endings (3). Her wish to be with Odysseus, to “accept him with all his faults” (189), is a wish to ignore the tragedy he propagated upon the maids. When she pleads with her former servants, “Why can’t you leave him alone” (190)? they must remind her that Odysseus’s “penance” is “not enough for us” (190). They are not satisfied, and they cannot ally with Penelope if she refuses to understand why.

This isolation and haunting, then, is the fruit of failed solidarity. Djebbar believes we can avoid enslavement through sisterhood, but Atwood postulates women will fail in their task to protect each other, leaving the voices of the victims ignored. To echo again the words of the Zeus towards *The Odyssey*’s close, Atwood’s concern remains that “we, for our part, will blot

out the memory” (XXIV.536-7) of our fallen sisters. When confronted with the death of the maids, Penelope tells us “[I] bit my tongue. It’s a wonder I had any tongue left, so frequently had I bitten it over the years” (160). She reasons that she can do nothing else, not even publicly display her grief, “or Odysseus will suspect me, as well” (160). In the end, it is not Odysseus but Penelope who fails her maids, who fails in her role as their protector. She still wants the alliance Homer promised her and wants the maids to let go of their vendetta—but, Atwood suggests, she cannot have both.

Atwood presents a startlingly dreary world. She rejects the possibility of female-female alliances, casts male-female alliances as exploitative, and sees patriarchy as inescapable for men or women. The anger of the maids, because it is unacknowledged, is inescapable. The forgotten victims of *The Odyssey*, they haunt Penelope and Odysseus, literally following them through the underworld. They seem to exist for nothing other than their revenge. Defined utterly through the actions of the Man that ended their lives, they seek justice in pretend courts, in anthropology lectures, in crafting their own choruses and voices (175, 163). The irony of *The Penelopiad*, which seeks to give voice to the nameless and to allow individuality to a symbol of female virtue, is that ultimately every character is reduced to a speechless symbol, an archetype in a larger story. Odysseus turns from flawed man to all powerful Men, as does Telemachus. Penelope becomes the woman complicit in her men’s faults. The maids are the victims. As long as they remain symbols, their identities are incapable of real progress or change. They are stuck in their roles and stuck with their scripts, like actors on stage performing the same play over and over again. The opportunity to reincarnate into the world of the living allows a literal embodiment of this hopelessness. Rebirth in the Lethe allows for an endless repetition, a ceaseless cycle without forgiveness, without mercy, and without remorse.

Through repositioning the maids as Penelope's allies, Atwood takes Penelope's complicated triumph and transforms it into a tragic failure. Atwood's adaptation of *The Odyssey* puts on trial men who have been allowed to victimize women, as well as the women who have enabled them. *The Penelopiad* recognizes and condemns Odysseus and Telemachus for their murders of the maids, but it equally condemns Penelope herself, who loses herself in the terrible knowledge that she does nothing to stop her men in their violating destruction.

CONCLUSION

Myth remains a powerful tool to discuss and comment on how we conceive of gender through transcribing, transforming, and transcending the scripts of the legendary women who helped to define and cement our current ideals. If our concepts of femininity are the result of the cultures that crafted them, and if those cultures are in turn crafted through their myths, then revisionism to the myths themselves become the most direct method for conferring new powers on the oppressed. Re-framing a story reveals, ultimately, the worldview inherent to the framers while also questioning the validity of this worldview.

Both Djébar and Atwood propose a system in which women are called upon to stand witness for each other, even as many fail to meet this challenge. The authors critique the dominant stories for ignoring or refuting relationships between women, while also questioning their heroines' adherence to the male-dominated script. Djébar does this through crafting new sisterhoods and bonds, whereas Atwood exposes the limitations of these bonds and the potential danger of women seeking power through male-sanctioned oppression.

In *Sister to Scheherazade*, Djébar appropriates the titular storyteller and her sister to tell a new tale about the complications of the modern female experience in Algeria. She successfully embeds the lessons of French and Arabic femininity to suggest a future wherein women stand in the shadow of Dinarzade to support each other and fight for a world wherein the Hajilas and Ismas can choose to walk veiled or naked down the street without reproach.

In *The Penelopiad*, Atwood uses the clever weaver to spin a shroud over of the modern experience of women in the Western world who live in repressed silence while the powerful men who have abused them walk free without reproach. She allows the dismissed maids to unravel

Penelope's weaving, offering the murdered girls a voice of solidarity and authority as they cry out for justice in a system which ignores them.

As re-framers of myth, Djebbar and Atwood offer us two distinct routes: taking back the myth and repurposing it as a story about empowerment and connection, or tearing down the myth to expose the troublesome assumptions that lie at its core.

I would argue that Djebbar's approach more successfully captures the complicated nature of her source material, perhaps partially because she can draw from two cultural contexts. Because *Sister to Scheherazade* is not a direct retelling, Djebbar has more freedom to explore *Arabian Nights* from multiple angles and perspectives. Atwood, however, in choosing to attack rather than uphold Penelope's status as a role model, does arguably more clearly define the ambiguity and dangers of the very category of "woman" as an identity. While her retelling does not do justice to the existing complexities of Homer and turns Penelope from a source of pride to one of shame, it does succeed in interrogating why individual women can and often do privilege their personal identity and well-being over their obligations to other women.

Debating the merits of sisterhood versus the need for individual experience, however, misses a larger concern. Both of these feminist retellings strip away the possibility inherent in their source texts that men and women can in fact exist in harmony. While *The Odyssey* and *Arabian Nights* both contain highly problematic elements in terms of how they prescribe gender, they still function as a terrain of healing between estranged Man and Woman. That this healing requires Woman to play a subservient role can and should be held up to scrutiny, but there seems to lie danger in refusing the possibility of male-female alliance or in prioritizing revenge over understanding. Both Djebbar and Atwood have moved women from the perpetrators of the wrongs done to the victims of the worlds in which they live. If they have done wrong in the retellings,

the important sufferers are other women. Turning the conversation from one between men and women to one between women may indeed be a necessary first step for feminist writers seeking to transform these myths, but perhaps the hardest leap rests not in Isma leaving her husband, but in her finding a way back to him, or, at least, inviting him into a new world that lacks the binaries and restrictive roles that earlier made their relationship impossible for Isma to accept. Atwood's Penelope sees through her crafty husband, but she is never permitted a scene of true mutual recognition when he sees through her; this Odysseus and Penelope never cease to be Man and Woman to each other, and this failure of personal identification prevents anything beyond a superficial connection between them. Djebbar and Atwood successfully set the stage for conversations and betrayals between women, but they fail to invite men into their proposed discussions. Finding a way to allow for and incorporate male allies seems to be a necessary and missing ingredient for future writers to consider.

The challenge facing writers who wish to re-appropriate the myths of the past is one that requires both acknowledging the agency of characters in the older texts while still critiquing the scripts which constrain them. Djebbar and Atwood walk this line—perhaps the former with greater nuance—and attempt to present alternative narratives to read against the dominant cultural markers. It is to be hoped that future authors can learn from Djebbar and Atwood to reshape the culture through new mythologies which better reflect the complex and shifting definitions of what it means to be a woman in our modern world.

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